No. 72

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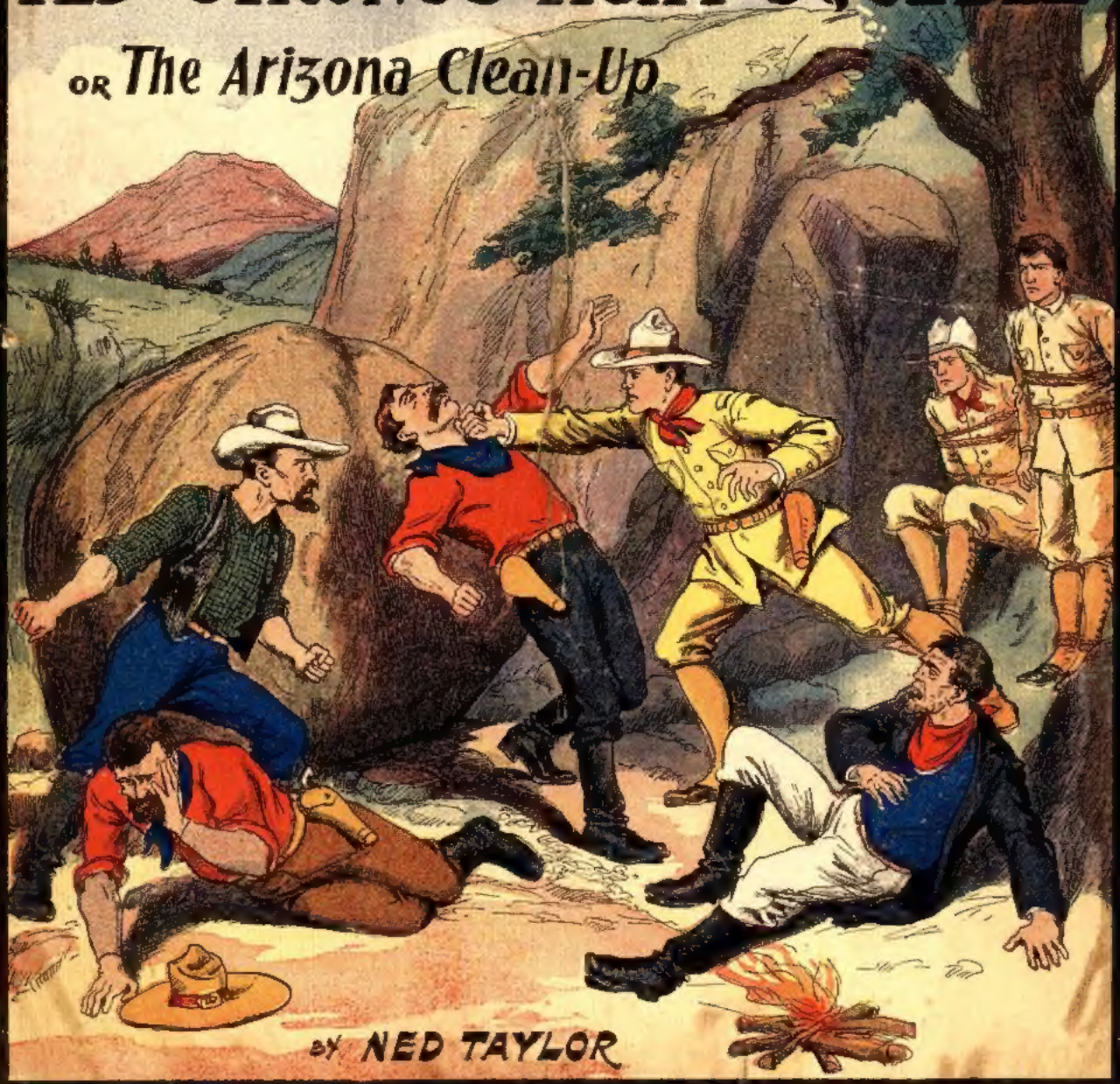
Young Rough Riders Weekly

MOST FASCINATING WESTERN STORIES

TED STRONG'S TIGHT SQUEEZE

OR The Arizona Clean-Up



BY NED TAYLOR

Before the others could recover from their surprise, Ted was upon them. He was fighting for his life, and his fists sought the most vulnerable points on the bodies of his enemies.

The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

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TED STRONG'S TIGHT SQUEEZE;

OR,

The Arizona Clean-Up.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

FROM THE JAWS OF DEATH.

Over a large, bent sycamore, growing on a bluff of the Chelly River, in the Navajo Reservation, Ariz., a flock of buzzards circled slowly, sometimes approaching close to the tree, at other times rising far above it. And so the circle narrowed, broadened, then narrowed again in sinister suggestiveness, while no sound broke the stillness save a series of moans and hoarsely muttered words, which came from the throat of a human being.

One long, stout limb of the sycamore stretched from the trunk over the bluff formed of a wall of rock, smooth and precipitous, which rose from the jagged bed of the ravine.

The limb was destitute of branches, and lashed to it was a young man in the garb of a prospector. His face, pale and drawn, was turned downward. In his position, he was fifty feet above the sharp rocks of the ravine and fifteen feet from the top of the bluff.

It was a hot day in summer, and for twenty-four hours he had occupied his perilous place. The sun's rays beat down pitilessly upon his head, and at times he became delirious. All efforts to free himself from his bonds had been vain. And, even if he had succeeded in regaining the use of his limbs, he might never have been able to crawl forward to the tree on account of physical weakness. Whichever way he looked, whichever direction his thoughts turned, death seemed to confront him. Sometimes, turning his face, he looked through the branches of the other limbs and saw the buzzards circling. He knew what their presence meant. He had been marked for death, and the buzzards were waiting, waiting for the time, now close at hand, when they might descend and pick his bones.

Ever and anon he would turn his agonized eyes toward the sky, in the faint hope that help might come from that quarter. But the hours passed, his pains grew more acute, and finally utter despair seized him. His moans became faint and his voice hoarse and scarcely to

be heard above a whisper, for the want of water had parched his lips and dried his throat.

"Oh, God!" he brokenly muttered; "to die like this, when the future holds out such glowing promises! Ethel—never to see her again, never to look into those clear, trustful eyes and see reflected there the love and constancy of the sweetest girl that ever drew the breath of life! Trapped and sacrificed by two fiends in human shape! Why did I trust them? Why——"

His soul-torturing mutterings ceased, for his ears had caught the sound of a horse's feet upon the trail which skirted the bluff.

Some one was approaching. It might be a friend. At the thought of possible succor, his face flushed with hope and his bloodshot eyes sparkled joyously.

He tried to shout, but only a faint, wheezing noise issued from his throat. Would the horseman pass without seeing him? No! He reins up his steed close to the sycamore, and calls out, in a clear, manly voice: "Hello, there! Are you alive?"

Moistening his parched lips, and with an effort that almost burst the veins in his body, the victim of hellish cruelty sent back the answer so that the words just reached the ear of the horseman:

"Yes! Save me—save me!"

The request was hard to make, but obedience was harder. The horseman—a fine-faced, admirably proportioned youth in a brown khaki uniform—knitted his brows, and looked from the branchless limb to the base of the precipice, and then to the tree. "Keep up your courage!" he shouted back;" and I'll get you out of your fix, or know the reason why!"

Dismounting from his steed, a magnificent coal-black animal, whose eyes expressed almost human intelligence, the youth removed his lariat from the horn of the saddle where it had been attached, and then divested himself of his spurs. Slung across the saddle was a rifle. The youth regarded it a moment thoughtfully, and then his keen eyes swept the trail up and down the river bank. There were few trees, and the view for miles was practically unobstructed.

"I'll chance it," he said to himself; "for what I am about to do should not take me more than fifteen minutes."

The horse was not secured. Such a precaution was not necessary. Master and horse understood each other. As the youth swung himself into the tree, he looked the faithful animal squarely in the eye. The look was returned with one of perfect comprehension.

Arrived at the limb which held the bound man, the youth in khaki saw, to his satisfaction, that it was strong enough to hold the weight of three men.

After knotting one end of the lariat to the trunk of the tree, the intending rescuer with the other end in his hand crawled carefully out upon the limb until he touched the feet of the bound man. Then he spoke, slowly and impressively: "I am going to pass this lariat under your body, and tie it tightly under your arms. When I shall have done that, I shall cut the thongs which hold you to the limb. The moment you find your hands free, grasp the slack of the lariat and hold firmly. Make no move until I regain the tree and give the word. Then work your body slowly backward. I will have the lariat in my hand, and will take in the slack as you proceed toward me. In case you shall fall, the lariat will hold you, and I will draw you up. But be sure to maintain a tight grip on the slack. Do you understand?"

"Yes," came the husky answer; "and the saints bless you for coming to my assistance!"

The lariat was adjusted, the thongs were cut, and the youth moved backward to the tree. Once there, he gripped the slack of the lariat, and, as the young prospector worked his body toward his rescuer, the slack was taken up so that there was all the time a tight line between the two. The progress of the young man on the limb was necessarily slow, but no accident happened, and at last he reached the tree, and was lifted up and placed in a position where he might rest and recover some portion of his strength. No words passed between the rescued and the rescuer until they found themselves on the bank, and the prospector had refreshed himself by a drink from the young horseman's canteen.

Now the rescued man was ready to speak, but before he could do so the youth in khaki said, in a tone of authority: "Here, chew a while on this hunk of jerked beef before you begin your story. You are as weak as a cat. The water has helped you some, but your stomach calls for something more substantial."

The piece of beef was eagerly taken, and, after ten minutes jaw work, the young prospector's face showed some color. He was yet too weak to stand upright, but he could stretch his arms and take deep, thankful breaths.

"I am getting there at a lightning rate," he said, with a smile. "By night I ought to be almost as good as new. You arrived in the nick of time. I don't believe I could have survived the day."

He looked up. All the buzzards were gone except one. It was perched on the topmost limb of the sycamore, and in the clear light of the altitude—the spot was over five thousand feet above the level of the sea—the eyes of the disreputable bird of prey were seen to blink reproachfully, as if to say: "Why did you disappoint me? I had counted on your carcass as a certainty, and here you have gone and taken a new lease of life. If you were a friend of mine, which you are not, you would go back to that limb and end life's game."

The youth in khaki cast his eyes upward, saw the buzzard, noted the expression of the eye, and, unslinging his rifle, blazed away, seemingly without taking aim.

The big bird toppled and fell into the ravine, and lay motionless.

"He has picked his last carcass," said the shooter, quietly. "I have no use for such carrion. I had a friend —but never mind. It's not a cheerful story, and, besides, I am not the story-teller to-day."

"And that means that I am," returned the other, quickly. "But, first, we should become acquainted. My name is Mark Weston. What's yours?"

"Theodore Strong, but the boys call me Ted."

The prospector looked at the speaker in surprise and admiration. "I have heard of you," he said. "You are a crackerjack, and I can't tell you how pleased I am to have met you in this manner."

The gallant commander of the young rough riders put out his hand. "And I am glad to have met you, and to have been of assistance to you. Shake! Your face is a passport to my affections. I size you up for a pretty decent sort of a fellow, and I am sure that you have got a yarn to tell that will prove it."

They shook hands, and thus was begun a friendship which grew stronger as time passed.

"My story is a simple one in many respects," began Mark Weston. "My father was a Philadelphia merchant, who failed in business, and then died, leaving my mother without adequate means of support. I was the only child, and was the manager of my father's business. When the affairs of the estate were settled, it was found that the liabilities exceeded the assets. I found other employment, but the salary was small, and I was discontented. When I had, by close economy, saved a few hundred dollars, and was planning to try my luck somewhere in the West, my mother died. After the funeral my desire to get away was intensified. I went to Denver, and there became acquainted with the daughter of a well-to-do stockman. I acted as secretary for her father until I was induced to come to Arizona. A prospector stopped one day at the ranch, a few miles out of Denver, and we struck up an acquaintance which ripened into friendship. The prospector was an old man, and he was on his way to Chicago for the purpose of interesting capitalists in a fabulously rich mine which he had recently discovered in Arizona. While at the ranch, he was stricken down with fever, and died.

"Before he passed away he revealed the location of the mine, and said I could have it, as he had no relations and no friends that he cared to make rich. I may as well tell you that I was then in love with my employer's daughter, and that, though I had never breathed what was in my heart, I had reason to believe that, if ever I should ask for her hand, the asking would not be in vain. But I was both poor and proud, and, therefore, I resolved to close my lips on the subject of love until I should be able to so better my pecuniary condition as to satisfy the scruples of her father.

"A month ago I came to Arizona to find the mine. My search was rewarded with success, and I was on my way to the nearest railway station when I fell in with two men, who professed to be cow punchers out of a job. We camped together last night, and while I was asleep an attempt was made to rob me of the few hundreds of dollars I carried in my wallet. I awoke in time to seize the hand of the man who was searching my pockets. He struck at me, but the blow did no damage. I was struggling with him, when the other rascal came to his assistance. I was soon overpowered, and, when morning came, I was lashed to my broncho and taken to this spot.

"My money, my weapons, my broncho, all were taken from me, and I was bound to the limb of that sycamore, with the fiendish statement that there I must remain until death came, and the buzzards."

The story was told. Ted Strong's comment was emphatic. "We must find the scoundrels who tried to murder you," he said. "Describe them. I may know them."

"One was tall, the other short. The tall man was stoutly built, while his companion was as thin as a rail. The short man wore long, black hair and straggly chin whiskers. He had but one eye, and his nose was curved like the beak of an eagle. The other fellow had a flat nose, a low forehead, two sharp eyes, and wore a short beard of the color of mud."

"Panhandle Ike and Flat Beak Corbison," said Ted, with positiveness. "I have never met them, but I have heard of their outrageous doings. They are two of the hardest cases Arizona has ever known. Why, there isn't a week that does not chronicle one of their misdeeds. They will steal anything from a safe to a tenderfoot's lunch, and they would as soon slit a man's throat as eat. My boys will be along pretty soon, and then we can talk business."

"Then you are not alone?"

"No. My troop is in Arizona with me. We have been chasing a band of cattle rustlers. The last one was caught the other day near the Mexican border. Last night we camped a few miles down the Chelly, and this forenoon I rode ahead of the lads, to give Black Bess an opportunity to kick up her heels. The mare was stolen from me last week, and I recovered her yesterday. She was as fresh as a daisy, and refused to go the gait undertaken by the rest of the nags. So I thought I would take some of the kinks out of her."

A loud shout from below made Ted turn his head. The troop was approaching. At the head was a queer figure, mounted on an Indian pony. He was a veritable pygmy of a man, and wore a sombrero which came down on a line with his eyes. As he came nearer, whooping and yelling, in a voice that was like low thunder, so heavy was it, Ted and Mark Weston could see the lower portion of a thin, wizened face, with a mouth that stretched from ear to ear.

"Wake snakes an' sink 'em in 'er p-i-t—pit!" he thundered. "I'm ther knocked-kneed, spavined maverick what struck Billy Patterson! Clear ther way fer th' army of ther Shinnin' Door!"

He reined up in front of the leader of the young rough riders, raised his sombrero, gave it a courtly sweep, and introduced himself.

"El Capitano Teodore String-strang-strong-strummadiddle, behold in me the keydive of this yer reservation! Cunnel Bob Basket, at yer sarvice! Spit on me, an' I'll claw out yer liver an' chuck it to ther birds! Perduce ther paw of fr'en'ship, an I shore abases myself an' passes ther deal up ter you!"

Ted Strong laughed and extended his hand. Out came the colonel's hand, extraordinarily large, weather-beaten and horny, and, as the two members met in a clasp, Ted winced, and then began to double up in pain. The eccentric dwarf grinned, and, as he dropped the crushed hand of the young rough rider, he said: "Ther heart of Cunnel Bob Basket is as strong as his fist. They air both yours. Chaw me up fer a gooseberry ef they ain't!"

"Drei jeers for Pop!" yelled Carl Schwartz, as he waved his hat above his head. "He is der piggest ding on der ice!"

CHAPTER II.

THE IDIOT APPEARS.

"Col. Bob," explained Ben Tremont, "is the nephew of Kit Carson, also an oldtime friend of Buffalo Bill, and the only man in Arizona who can control the governor and the legislature. What he says goes."

"Where did you meet him?" asked Ted.

"Down the river, and about ten minutes after you left us. The colonel is on his way to Ojo Puerte, for the purpose of organizing a posse to hunt down two of the worst criminals in the reservation."

The young rough rider thought of Mark Weston's assailants. They were probably the men Col. Bob was seeking. "Do you refer to Panhandle Ike and Flat Beak Corbison?" he said.

"Sure as butter is made outer grass!" spoke the diminutive colonel. "Hev ther pesky rickeroons bin er cavortin' about this yer stampin' ground? Ef they hev, then ter blazes with Ojo Puerte! You alls stan' by my back, an' we'll light down on ther murderin' pair o' jacks an' make 'em jump six ways fer Sunday!"

"I'm with you," said Ted, and then he told the story of the young prospector.

"There's a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads to New Jersey," put in Fatty Durkin, the thespian of the troop. "I long to meet these human wolves in battle array. When I am in the midst of conflict my soul sings 'Johnny, git yer gun.' Then I am in my proper element. My foot is on my native heath and my name's McGinnes."

Col. Bob looked at the fat boy quizzically. "Kin you really fight, son?" he asked, in affected surprise.

Durkin's chubby face flushed. "Try me," he replied, with an air of disdain, "and you'll soon see whether or not I can hold my own!"

"Air you gamblin' any that you kin git away with me?"

The fat boy, angered at the irritating smile which accompanied the words, quickly made answer: "In the twinkling of an eye, in the falling of a leaf, in the flutter of a lamb's tail, I can make you look like thirty cents!"

Bud Morgan winked hard at Ted Strong. The wink said: "There's going to be fun."

Col. Bob Basket shed coat and sombrero.

"Thet's shore a challenge!" he remarked. Then, to Durkin: "I'm er perspiring ter collar the dinero you bin er speakin' of. I'm achin' ter alterate my complexion. Yes, I shore am! Put onter me er head like unto er pizened purp, wipe ther sile with me, interdoose yer fist inter my engagin' phizmahogany, gouge out my eyes an' chaw my ears inter er hamburg, but don't kill me, fer I hev a mother whom I'm shore dependin' on fer support!"

Fatty Durkin was game. With lips compressed, he asked: "Which shall it be, fists or a wrestle?"

"Rastlin' will suit yer respcted uncle. Ketch an' ketch er can."

"All right."

At a safe distance from the bank a ring was formed and the contest began. If the colonel's body was short, his arms were long. That they had a giant's power in them was evidenced when they encircled the robust form of the fat boy.

Durkin was allowed to take the under hold, but this gave him no advantage, for when he essayed to throw down the dwarf he found that he had no breath with which to operate. The colonel, whose arms wrapped the body of his adversary, had a crushing force, surpassing that of the coils of a boa constrictor. The two forms swayed a moment, and then, with scarcely an effort, the fat boy was tossed high in air. The fall must have had an injurious effect, had there been any fall. But there was none. As the body descended, Col. Bob caught it and shot it upward again. The spectators broke into shouts of laughter.

Bud Morgan spread his legs, stooped and extended his arms. "Low ball!" he called out to the colonel. "Now!" With a surprising exercise of strength, the fat boy was sent whirling through the air, to be caught by Morgan, who went backward and measured his length on the ground when the almost round ball of fat struck him in the chest. His head received a thump which for the moment made him see stars. The impact resulted in no injury to Durkin. He was on his feet, gazing stupidly about him, when Col. Bob came up and put out his hand.

"Don't yank yer mouth down an' look as if yer'd lost yer best friend, son," he said, in a cheery tone. "You shore got nothin' ter kick against. When you git it through yer noddle thet ther champeen all-around scrapper of Arizony was ther galoot yer went up against, yer won't feel so meechin' about it."

Josiah's eyes brightened at the words. He was a thoroughbred, and he thought he knew a man when he saw one. He shook hands with the victor, and said he was proud to know him.

Now it was that Ted Strong started in to talk business. "Boys," said he, "we must not leave Arizona until we have routed out and punished the two scoundrels who robbed and tried to kill my friend Weston, and who are wanted badly by Col. Bob."

"As the deputy sheriff of Yavapai County, I'm er bettin' that I hev ther right ter call fer help whenever an' wherever I cottons ter ther ijee thet I needs it!" returned the colonel. "An' I shore needs it now!"

"Do you know where to look for them?" asked Ted.

"They got er hidin' place somewhar near the county line."

"In the reservation?"

"No; in Yavapai. It's close to ther edge of ther Painted Desert, and in ther hills. It's a sure shot they are thar, fur thar's a hull bilin' of miners and stockmen who've seen 'em many a time p'intin' fer the place."

"Why has no attempt been made to capture their stronghold?"

Col. Bob's nose went upward in disgust.

"Whyn't nobody tried ter rout 'em out, eh? Bekase thar's a white-livered set loafin' around them thar hills. Ther hull rotten outfit is afraid ter tackle ther rapscallions. I ain't er sayin' it 'ud be er picnic raidin' them two rickeroons in their rocky fort, but thar's some folkses as 'ud try ter make ther riffle afore makin' a motion to adjourn."

"Are you acquainted with the country which includes those hills, colonel?" questioned Doc Fenton.

"Know every speck o' bunch grass, every rock an' bowlder, every tree an' every water hole."

"Then it will be easy to get to the hiding place of these outlaws, won't it?"

"Easy as rollin' downhill. But ther gittin' out part won't be so easy. Ther hole of these yer murderin' yamahoos is a cave that I reckon ther prehysteric cliff dwellers user ter inhabit. Ther mouth to this yer hole overlooks er precipice an' commands er view of ther hull desert an' all ther approaches. Ter git ther bulge on these mud-eatin' wizard slitters, we must come Mister Fox onter 'em."

"Have you made any plans?"

Col. Bob looked at Ted Strong, the speaker, and shook his head. "But we'll git 'em, though," he said. "You fer ther headwork, an' me an' yer rip-roarin' outfit fer ther gun an' muscle business."

The young commander of the troop knitted his brows in thought.

"He is scratching his think works for an idea," said Beanpole Perkins to Mark Weston; "and, when he trundles it out, it will be a corker."

Ted Strong cogitated for a few moments. Then his brow cleared, and he looked up, with a queer smile on his handsome countenance. "Boys," said he, "I have peppered the bull's-eye. I've got a plan that I think will do the trick. But, before I enter into an explanation, I want to ride up the hill beyond that clump of cottonwoods. I won't be gone more than half an hour. While I am away you might build a fire and make some coffee and fry some bacon. It's about time for a feed."

"Going to take a squint over the country?" inquired Kit Summers.

"Perhaps."

Without further words, Ted mounted Black Bess and loped up the hill. The boys saw him disappear from sight beyond the cottonwoods, and then began preparations for the midday meal.

The coffee was boiling and the bacon was sizzling in the pan, when down the hill shambled the queerest-looking specimen of humanity the young rough riders had ever looked upon. Trousers and coat—long-tailed and stained with red mud and rent in many places—were made of burlap sacks. His hat, of straw, and dilapidated and with the crown gone, was shoved far back on his head. Long, straggling, flaxen hair floated in the breeze above his shoulders.

As he came nearer, the boys beheld a face that made even Col. Bob shout with laughter. It was the face of an idiot. The wide, open mouth, the eyes, closed so that only little beyond the pupils could be seen, the red lids and the redder nose, the hair matted about and almost concealing the forehead, the monstrous ears and the protruding tongue, *all these and other external evidences, grotesque and comical, were too much for the risibilities of the youngsters and their two older companions.*

The idiot approached the group about the camp fire. He was chewing a straw, and he made the first remark.

"Man he say"—a prolonged giggle—"he say Moses come here."

"What man?" asked Ben Tremont. "Teddy Strong?"

"Nonno. Man." And, saying this, the idiot suddenly turned a handspring and landed in the midst of the fire, overturning the pan of bacon and just missing the coffee-pot.

A half score of hands quickly jerked him from the coals. Then the bass voice of Col. Bob rose high in wrath.

"You onery, watermelon-mouthed apology fer crow's bait, whad yer mean by them supercilerous cadidoes?

Air we er layin' around hyer ter be er playin' hayseeds ter this yer sort o' moss-kivered monkey business, or air we goin' ter riz up onto our hind legs an' mop ther yerth with yer?"

The idiot giggled, and then, flapping his arms, began to crow.

Col. Bob gazed at him, at first in red-hot anger and then in amusement.

Carl Schwartz, who was engaged in restoring the bacon to the pan, ventured this remark: "I dond say nodings, fer I exposes dot dis vosn't my vuneral. Bud maype Col. Pob vood lige to tagle dot biece of voolishness lige he did dat vat poy, vot?"

"I'd be plumb ashamed ter put my claws onter him," was the reply.

No sooner were the words said than the idiot shot out his right hand and struck the doughty colonel in the chest. The little man went backward, but managed to retain his footing. With an ugly grin, he sprang upon the assailant, and, taking the upper hold, as in the case of Fatty Durkin, essayed to throw the idiot up in the air.

But he met with a surprise.

The idiot was strong as a bull, and, obtaining, through the colonel's permission, the under hold, proceeded to make efficient use of his advantage.

The colonel squeezed and he squeezed. For a time, honors were easy. Soon, however, the colonel began to breathe heavily. His powerful arms lost their vigor, and, as he partly relaxed his grip for the purpose of taking a fresh start, he was lifted off his feet and up in the air. Now the idiot showed the strength of which he was capable. With all his muscles in play, he swung the body of his antagonist backward and let it fall, with a thud, on the ground five feet behind him.

This feat accomplished, he sat down by the fire, warmed his hands and giggled with the abandon of a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl.

The young rough riders clapped their hands and yelled.

Col. Bob sat up, and passed a trembling hand over his brow. "I shore caves!" he gasped. "If any of you gents will fetch me er knothole, I'll perceed ter insinooate myself through it. I was er gamblin' that thar ombre was er fule, but I'm bettin' a chaw o' terbacker agin' a last year's bird's nest thet he's not sich a fule as he looks!"

The idiot arose to his feet. The eyes opened, the mouth assumed another shape, the foolish grin disappeared.

"Right you are, colonel," he said, in a rich, manly voice, "and Ted Strong is ready to apologize if he has hurt your feelings."

"Well, I'll shore ber blamed if you don't corral ther bakery!" exclaimed the dumfounded deputy sheriff of Yavapai County. "Apoligize? Shore not! You licked me—licked me fa'r—an' I'm proud ter be licked by sich er lightnin' striker as you be!"

Ted had deceived all of the boys. No one of his friends had suspected that he was the possessor of such rare histrionic abilities. Josiah Durkin felt that his title as actor of the outfit had been wrested from him. But he bore his humiliation with a smiling face.

"The king is dead—long live the king!" he shouted. "Hurrah for Ted Strong, the champion character impersonator of two continents!"

When congratulations were over, Ted, with a serious countenance, said: "I suppose you are wondering what possessed me to play the fool. I'll tell you. It was for the purpose of ascertaining whether or not I could make a success of the character. You have all noticed the little, leathern bag which I have kept strapped to my saddle ever since we left Nebraska. The idiot disguise was in that bag. I thought, perhaps, I might have occasion to use it some day, and, when the time came, it was my intention first to do a little practice work on the boys."

"But how in the name of jimmenetty gorem," said Thad Perkins, "did you learn the acting part?"

Ted Strong smiled. "At school," he replied. "We used to give dramatic entertainments at the close of the half terms, and I was the star of the kid aggregation. My favorite rôle was that of the *Idiot Witness* in the old English play of that name. I used to rehearse the part, in costume, before my parents, and I fooled them so well that they were afraid I might become filled with the desire to adopt the stage as a profession.

"But I had never any such idea. Play acting is all right when undertaken for amusement, but I have never had any desire to don the sock and buskin as the business of my life. When I came West I brought my costume and make-up box with me, and to-day I have shown you the use I can make of them."

"Your play of to-day means something," said Ben Tremont. "You haven't been playing the idiot just to pass away the time."

"Indeed, I have not. I intend to play the part for a serious purpose. As the idiot, I shall enter the den of the two desperadoes whose capture we have determined upon."

Silence fell upon the little party. Col. Bob looked at Ted in disapprobation. Bud Morgan's face had a grave expression. Mark Weston shook his head.

"Let me outline my plan, boys," said Ted, seriously. "before you start in to argue the case. I am not going to go up to that hole in the rock and butt in on Panhandle Ike and Flat Beak Corbison. That would be a fool play, sure enough. No; my scheme is something different. They will take me in, and they will think me a genuine natural. Once in their cave, the game will be ours."

"It's shore easy ter talk, cap," put in Col. Bob, "but how air yer goin' ter make ther pair o' piratin' rickeroons take you in an' swallow ther deceivin' game?"

"This way," returned Ted, composedly. "We will ride from here to the Tassaba Settlements. There we will scatter for a few days. Each one of us will be hunting for a stray idiot, who had been attached to the troop of young rough riders as a mascot. He wandered from camp while we were crossing the Moqui Buttes, and we trailed into the Painted Desert."

"I am catching on," said Kit Summers.

"Every person in the country, from the settlements up to the Thousand Wells—and this will take in the outlaws' neck o' woods—will hear of the search, and will talk about it. When the loss is thoroughly known, I will leave camp some fine night and make my way toward the bandits' stronghold. If they are there, and see me, all will be well. Other details can be considered later."

The boys urged the danger of the proposed undertaking, but Ted laughed at them, and finally it was agreed that his plan should be tried.

Two days riding brought the party to a water hole near the settlements, about forty miles over the line between the reservation and Yavapai County. A good camping place was found, and one moonlight night, ten days after camp was made, Ted Strong, in the guise of the idiot, stole away from his fellows and entered upon one of the most dangerous adventures of his life.

CHAPTER III.

TED AT A DISADVANTAGE.

Before departing on his journey, Ted Strong had been given complete directions regarding the route to the desperadoes' hole in the rocks, and also such information concerning the locality as Col. Bob Basket seemed able to give. The colonel said he was convinced that there was more than one means of entrance and exit. He knew, however, of only one, and that one was in plain evidence from the steep mountain side. It led up to the mouth of the cave, and was easily traveled. But, as he said, it was a route which only the desperadoes could travel in safety. Once in their cave, they could cover with their rifles the trail to the cave, and pick off any person who should be venturesome enough to attempt to come up and dislodge them.

But both Panhandle Ike and Flat Beak Corbison had been seen on the other side of the mountain, not only outside the cave, which must have another exit, but also at the foot of the cliff which looked toward Thousand Wells, a direction opposite to that side of the mountain upon which the trail was clearly defined.

It was a mystery to Col. Bob, so he said, how the outlaws reached the cave from the base of the cliff. He was positive that they did so whenever deemed necessary, and Ted Strong was urged by the colonel to find, if possible, the second, and secret, means of exit from the stronghold.

The commander of the young rough riders entered upon his chosen task with mind made up to bring about the capture of the villains, or die in the attempt. For many hours he pursued his lonely way across the desert without seeing or hearing anything to indicate that he was being watched.

Toward daylight, when the moon was no longer visible, but when the light was sufficient for him to see objects half a mile distant, he discerned a dark form stealing along the base of a small butte about five hundred yards in front of him. It might be some large animal—a bear, or a panther—and it might be a human being.

Ted did not stop, nor use his revolver. A shot at the distance would have had no effect, except to decide the question whether the form was that of wild beast or man. But Ted was playing a part, and he played it now just as if he were in the center of a crowd of lookers-on. Perhaps he increased his steps, though he did not run.

As he drew nearer to the object, the light of the coming day grew brighter, and he soon saw that the object was a man, and that man Col. Bob.

The discovery filled Ted's mind with surprise and some suspicion. Why was Col. Bob out here in the night? Ted had left the diminutive deputy sheriff in camp, and rolled up in his blankets. According to the understanding, Bob was to start in the morning for Hatche's Well, and make certain arrangements as a part of the program which Ted had outlined.

And yet here he was in Ted's front, and acting in a manner that required explanation.

When within hearing distance, Ted shouted: "Hello, there!"

Col. Bob turned, saw the young rough rider, and at once ran toward him.

"I'm glad I have found yer!" he exclaimed. "I bin er runnin' fer more'n an hour!"

"What has happened? Why have you come after me?" asked Ted, with some sternness.

"Why? Ter pervent your makin' a blame fule o' yerself. You're shore made up as a fule, but you want ter give yer brain er chance onct in a while, or yer name's Dennis!"

"Will you kindly explain?" said Ted, coldly. The little man was excited, and his countenance seemed to express genuine solicitude, but the young rough rider had had experience enough to make him distrust appearances. While he waited for an explanation, he kept his hand on his revolver.

Col. Bob realized that he was under suspicion, and, instead of getting angry, became humble and appealing.

"I knows this yer comin' out yer looks sorter off color, cap, but yer can't keep cases on circumstances. Arter you moseyed off from the camp, an idee struck me, an'

I slid out ter ketch you an' give you ther benefit of it. Your idee was ter meander carelessly up ther trail ter ther cave, thinkin' thet Panhandle an' Flat Beak 'ud see you an' waltz down ter meet you. Thet's puttin' it straight, I reckon?"

"That was the program, colonel."

"Well, it won't do, son—won't do at all! For why? Beca'se those two rickeroons 'ud shoot you first an' come down ter meet you arterwards. How'd they get wisdom onter ther fack thet you was a shore enough fule? Simply by gettin' sight of you five or six hundred yards away? They shore wouldn't know you from a side o' sole leather. Every ombre, with them, is either a friend or an enemy. An' strangers, in their eyes, is always enemies. You couldn't make good half a mile away, an' you wouldn't git er chance ter do it at close quarters, fer ther reason, as I hev said, thet they wouldn't give you ther opportunity."

There was sound sense in the words of Col. Bob, and Ted's suspicions began to fade away. But he was not yet entirely satisfied.

"I might fool them in spite of what you say," he replied; "for you don't know what antics I intend to display when I reach the hill below the cave."

"They'll hev ter be gilt-edged ter put ther blinkers onter Ike and Flat Beak."

"They are gilt-edged," said Ted, confidently.

Col. Bob screwed up his face, and appeared to be doing some responsible thinking.

"Maybe you kin make it, arter all," he said, slowly. "I was goin' ter perpose somethin' else, but—I dunno—I dunno."

He let his eyes fall to the ground. Some struggle was going on in his mind.

Ted Strong's suspicions again crept to the surface. He was beginning to have a correct idea of the situation.

Further evidence to make sure that Col. Bob was a wolf in sheep's clothing was wanting, but Ted thought by the exercise of a little shrewdness he could obtain it. He was aware of the fact that his recent successful chase after the cattle rustlers had placed him on the black list of every desperado in Arizona. Their fear of him, their knowledge of the daring raids he and his troop had made in Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado and Nebraska, of his willingness at all times to take the field against the desperadoes of the West, might induce them to believe that he would not likely leave the Territory without having a shy at every band of outlaws that infested it.

And there was also the matter of revenge to consider. The thieves he had killed, sent to prison or scattered had friends who cherished a deadly resentment against him and his company. This Col. Bob might be one of them, and he might have joined the troop for the express purpose of leading it into a trap.

To try to resolve doubt into certainty, he said, in a careless way: "All my boys are strangers to you, aren't they?"

The little man, who had not the quick wit to grasp the meaning hidden in this simple question, answered, readily: "Yes. I never met none of 'em until I came up with 'em on ther Chelly."

Ted Strong smiled inwardly. The bait had been taken.

"Then," he continued, with a sharp glance at the colonel's face, "all the information respecting your business, your relations to leading citizens and officials, your career as a pioneer, came from your own lips, did it not?"

"Why, shore!" with a sudden hardening of the muscles of the mouth. "Your lads pumped me fer p'ints about myself, an' I gin ther best I had. What of it?"

"Nothing."

The answer was given shortly. The colonel shrugged his heavy shoulders. "'Pears ter me," he said, after a pause, "thet you air tryin' ter work up a case agin' me. Show yer hand. What's eatin' yer?"

Deliberately, with revolver ready for instant action and eyes for any movement the colonel might make, Ted replied: "I am eaten up with suspicion. You have not given a satisfactory explanation of your presence here this morning. Your solicitude for me comes rather late in the day. The details of my proposed venture were carefully gone over before we left the reservation, two days ago. We have talked about the matter since, and in none of our talks did you raise any objection to the course I intended to pursue. You knew all about the danger, and yet you were willing that I should go ahead as I had planned."

The dwarf looked the stern-faced, sturdy youth up and down, with a countenance that was indicative of rage and perplexity.

"If you weren't a kid, I'd shore give yer a piece of my mind!" he hissed. "But I ain't er gittin' huffy with nursery brats!"

The insult did not cause Ted's cheeks to flush. On the contrary, he felt a thrill of satisfaction. The colonel was tearing the mask from his own face.

"Give him rope," thought the young rough rider, "and he will hang himself."

"As you've got er bee in yer bunnit an' air takin' er cross-eyed squint at ther case, I'll shore bid you good-by, an' hopin' thet we won't never meet up with each other no more!"

"Is it your intention to give up the pursuit of these outlaws?"

"No!" the colonel shouted, in rage. "I'm er goin' ter keep on, but I'll work on my own hook. You go your way, an' I'll shore go mine."

With this speech, the dwarf made a move to depart, but a sharp command from Ted Strong caused him to halt suddenly.

"Stop! You are not going to leave me in this fashion!"

The determined youth's pistol was out, and Col. Bob, turning, saw that the muzzle was on a line with his forehead.

He trembled, and began to splutter.

"You're actin' like ere Simon-pure idjit!" he said. "What right hev you got ter be stickin' your nose inter my business?"

"The right that belongs to every man who respects the law, and who has no sympathy with lawbreakers," answered Ted, calmly.

"Shucks! Take er tumble to yourself, young feller! Go and tell yer mother she shore wants yer! Put yer head inter a bar'l o' softsoap! Ther's a hard knot in yer brain. Thet will soften it."

Col. Bob spoke sneeringly, but he was ill at ease.

Ted gazed at him curiously. "You are a queer citizen, colonel," he remarked, "and you're pretty shrewd, in a way. But you can't work any of your games on yours truly. I may be a baby, but I've quit taking flimflam juice in my milk. Perhaps you don't know it, but you have given yourself dead away. You want to go from this spot and warn Panhandle Ike and Flat Beak Corbison that I am coming. You desire that they shall know in advance of the deception I intend to practice upon them. You are plotting for my death. Don't deny it, for I have read you like a book. You are no more deputy sheriff of Yavapai County than I am Admiral Togo! You are a spy and go-between for the outlaws of Arizona. Shed your weapons, and don't try to take a nap while you're at the work."

Col. Bob Basket's face was a study while Ted Strong was speaking. He ceased to dissemble. He gritted his teeth and clinched his hands; his eyes shot fire and hinted at murder. But he made no movement with his hands. Death lurked in the chambers of the revolver held by the sharp, self-contained youth before him, and he did not want to die at that moment. In spite of his sneering words, he had a wholesome respect for the strength, ability and grit of the leader of the young rough riders. The wrestling match on the banks of the Chelly had had its effect. He knew he was not dealing with a babe in arms.

Ted began to count, "One, two——"

The colonel saw no mercy in the eyes of the youth who had him at such a disadvantage, and, with an oath, he threw down two revolvers and an ugly-looking knife.

Ted kicked them out of reach, and then issued the second command: "Lie down!" The colonel obeyed.

The young rough rider had started out with cords which he thought he might have occasion to use in the event of a successful entry into the cave of the two outlaws.

With these cords he proceeded to bind his prisoner. Col. Bob would have made resistance if opportunity had been offered. But Ted's first move was to seize the little man's hands. The wrists secured, the rest was easy.

"Goin' ter leave me here on ther desert?" whined the colonel, after Ted had risen to his feet.

"It would serve you right if I did," was the answer.

"But I'll shore pass in my chips, if you do, cap! We're off ther trail an' away from water, an' thar's nothin' about here but coyotes an' buzzards."

"What kind of a fate had you reserved for me?" Ted inquired.

The colonel made no reply. Ted picked up the prisoner's weapons and started to move away.

The colonel began to cry like a baby.

"Fer God's sake, don't leave me ter die er horrible death!" he pleaded. "Treat me white, an' I'll do ther same by you."

Ted stopped and appeared to consider.

"Unless you tell me what your devilish plans were, and also all you know about the cave, I shall be compelled to leave you for the coyotes and the buzzards. I mean what I say."

The colonel drew a deep breath.

"No lies, now," warned the inflexible youth. "If what you conclude to tell me shall prove to have no relation to the truth, your death will be a matter of hours. If you open up, I'll take you back to camp and turn you over to the boys, with instructions to hang you, if I get into trouble through any lies."

The colonel's mind was made up to tell the truth. He loved life, and the good things in it, and believed that he could escape punishment at the hands of the law by an open confession now.

"Here goes, then," he said. "I was intendin', as you sizes it up, ter go ter ther cave an' put Ike an' Flat Beak wise about your idjit play. Then they'd naterly swoop down an' gather you in."

"How long have you been in league with the outlaws of this Territory?"

"Ever since I came yer from Colorado, and that's a matter o' ten year."

"Why did you join my troop?"

The colonel was silent a moment. But he could not meet Ted Strong's cold, steady gaze. Neither could he cover up the truth.

"Some o' my friends had it in fer you alls," he replied, "an' I was commissioned ter pave ther way fer puttin' yer inter a hole."

"I understand. And do Panhandle Ike and Flat Beak Corbison fear that I may begin a campaign against them?"

"Sure shot. They air er gamblin' that you will camp on their trail immejet."

"You have told one story about the cave. Now it's up to you to tell another, and the true one."

"What I reeled off war true enough, in part. I lied

about ther secret entrance. They gits out an' in by means of another outlet of ther cave."

"Where is that outlet?"

"At ther foot of ther cliff. It's kivered up by a big bowlder. Ther bowlder swings on concealed hinges, an' is easy ter work. No one not in ther secret 'ud ever think of looking fer an outlet thar."

"I presume you intended to reach your friends' nest by way of this secret entrance?"

"I war thinkin' of doin' that same thing, sart'inly."

There was more talk, and, when Ted had learned all he wished to know, he stood the colonel on his feet, and the return journey to the camp was begun. It was now daylight, and they were about twelve miles from the troop of the young rough riders.

As the day promised to be hot, Ted hurried his prisoner over the ground at the highest rate of speed he was capable of going.

After walking some five miles, they came to a gully running in an irregular line from a large butte to a sink in the desert.

By traversing a considerable portion of its length, a mile of the journey might be saved. Its depth was about twenty-five feet, and there were few rocks along its course, so that walking was not difficult.

There were many twists and turns, and, on coming around one bend, they confronted two men sitting on the ground, smoking.

They had evil faces, and each was heavily armed. A few rods away were their horses.

At sight of them, Col. Bob gave a shout of joy.

Ted Strong reached for a pistol, but at that moment the belt buckle gave way, and the belt, with all its weapons, Col. Bob's and his own, dropped to the ground.

On the heels of this misadventure, the villainous dwarf shouted: "Plug him, boys! He's Ted Strong!"

CHAPTER IV.

CASSIE BARLOW'S STORY.

The leader of the young rough riders had been in many tight places in his life, but lightning work had generally saved him.

On this occasion he acted quickly.

Before the villains were able to draw their revolvers, Ted, with one leap, was upon them. A kick in the head sent one sprawling, a blow in the jaw flattened the other. Their weapons had been taken from them, and Ted had just finished the work of binding them, when from down the gully came two more men, and with them a beautiful girl.

There was no need of explanation. The spectacle which the foreground presented, the sight of Ted Strong, erect and breathing war, told the story.

Two bullets cut the air.

Had the two outlaws with the girl been more cool, the young rough rider must have gone down never to arise. But they were startled and excited, and, as a consequence, the shots went wild.

One, however, found a human stopping place. Col. Bob Basket, standing on one side of Ted Strong, received it, and, as it penetrated his brain, his connection with this vale of tears ceased suddenly.

Ted would have fired in return had not the pair of desperadoes used the girl as a shield.

With pistols raised, he said: "It will be wise policy on your part to surrender!"

One of the outlaws burst into a horse laugh.

"Surrender yer granny!" he said. "But," he added, "I'm shore willin' ter parley, if my pard ain't er buckin'."

"Parley goes," assented the pard.

"Don't trust them!"

These words were uttered in a musical, appealing voice by the girl. She stood in front of the men, and Ted, observing her critically, saw that she was not a girl of the mountains, but one who had been brought up in a refined atmosphere. Her lovely face spoke of intelligence, culture and nobility. Why was she here, in the Painted Desert, a prisoner in the hands of evil men?

Before giving attention to the men, Ted asked: "Who are you, miss, and why are you in this position?"

"These men have committed a murder," she answered, fearlessly. "I saw them, and they are taking me away because my testimony would hang them."

The murderers scowled, and one of them, the one nearest to her, caught her roughly by the arm and flung her backward with such force that she fell, and lay moaning upon the ground.

Ted Strong's fine face grew hot with indignation as he witnessed this brutal action. Reckless of consequences, he sprang forward and dealt the girl's assailant a powerful blow in the jaw, and, as the miscreant staggered back and tried to save himself from falling, he swung with his left, which held both pistols, and caught the other fellow under the ear, just as a revolver cracked close to his head.

The young rough rider's sudden onslaught slightly disarranged the villain's aim, and the bullet grazed his shoulder.

Now ensued a mix-up that in which youth, strength and agility were seen to magnificent advantage.

As the second villain was measuring his length upon the sand, the first, now erect and ugly, was raising the pistol to put his dangerous foe out of business. But no shot was fired. Quick as a flash, Ted Strong raised one of his revolvers and sent it flying through the air. It struck the man intent on murder squarely between the eyes, and, while he was reeling, a right hander, charged with the force of a pile driver, effected connection on his jugular, and he sought the earth with a suddenness and

violence that induced immediate unconsciousness. On the instant of the fall Ted instinctively ducked his head. And it was well that he did so, for a bullet fired from the second villain's revolver smote the air where his head had been.

Number two was not on his feet, but was sitting down. He would have taken another shot at the young rough rider if a new ally had not come to Ted's rescue. The girl had staggered to an upright position, with a large stone in her hand. The prevailing opinion is that a woman does not know how to throw a stone. Cassie Barlow was an exception to the rule. Beanpole Perkins, champion in this class, could not have done better. Cassie let fly at the very moment when villain number two was preparing to make good the boast he had often made that he was the best shot in Arizona. The stone caromed on his forehead, and subsequent proceedings, covering a matter of ten minutes, had no interest for him.

Ted thanked the brave girl with his eyes, and then turned his attention to the man who had been having some trouble with his jugular. His form was beginning to twitch, and he was uttering groans that indicated most distressed physical condition. Ted removed the fellow's battle armament, and then said to the girl: "Take this pistol and cover him, while I am looking out for his partner."

A few minutes sufficed to secure with cords the two villains who had abducted the girl. "I reckon it is about time to take a rest," said Ted, with a smile. "I like exercise, but this sort is rather strenuous. I don't believe I could keep it up all day."

They sat down upon the bank, and faced each other.

The girl's lovely countenance was aglow with admiration and joy. In eloquent words, words that made Ted blush and fidget, she expressed her appreciation of the young rough rider's courageous and gallant work in her behalf.

The brave youth frankly assured her that he would have failed utterly but for her assistance.

Then, to change the subject, he asked her about the murder which she had witnessed.

"I must tell you something about myself, as well," she said. "My name is Cassie Barlow, and my home is in St. Louis. A month ago I went to Flagstaff to pay a long-promised visit to a dear friend and schoolmate, Mrs. Ringgold. Her husband is a mining man, and is away from home a great deal of the time. Their residence is on the outskirts of the little town, and during her husband's absences her brother, in the past, was her protector. He was—for he is dead now—a clerk in one of the town stores, and he made his home with his sister.

"On my arrival, I found Mrs. Ringgold alone. Mr. Ringgold was away, and Charles Farley, the brother, had gone to Belmont for the day on business for his employer. He was expected home in the evening.

"From what afterward occurred, I am of opinion that my presence in the house was not known to the villains who are the cause of my appearance here to-day. A short time after dark, Mrs. Ringgold went down the road about a quarter of a mile to take some delicacies to a sick neighbor. She did not intend to be gone more than half an hour.

"While she was away, the two men on the ground here came to the front door, and, without knocking, entered. I was busy in the kitchen at the time, and, hearing the noise, supposed that my friend had returned. I was undeceived when one of the men opened the kitchen door. He showed surprise on seeing me, but, quickly recovering himself, drew a pistol and gruffly ordered me to march into the living room, which he had just left. Womanlike, I screamed at the top of my voice.

"The scream brought Manuel, an old Mexican who worked about the place, and while the villain was dragging me from the kitchen, Manuel came hurrying in. Before he could make a move for my benefit, I was flung aside, and a knife was buried in his heart.

"As he fell, I heard sounds of a struggle within the house. Without bestowing a glance upon me, the murderer of Manuel dashed into the living room. I followed, and saw two men fighting upon the floor. One was Charles Farley, Mrs. Ringgold's brother. I easily recognized him from the photograph which my friend had that day shown me. He was on top of his adversary, and would, I think, have succeeded in coming off victor if the other villain had not taken a hand. Before my eyes there was a repetition of the horrible scene I had witnessed in the kitchen. The knife again came into play, and Charles Farley was cruelly and brutally slain. I saw the blood gush from his neck; I saw the knife raised for a second blow, and then I fell in a faint upon the floor.

"When I again opened my eyes I was on my feet, and a gag was in my mouth. Each of the murderers had me by an arm, and I was dragged from the house and placed upon a horse. One of the fiends mounted beside me, and we rode toward the creek and skirted the San Francisco Mountain. After riding for half the night, the gag was removed from my mouth, but I was informed that, should I raise my voice at any time for the purpose of bringing assistance, I would be shot without mercy.

"Since then we have traveled a great distance. Every day I have feared for my life. More than once did the villains debate my fate. One was for killing me, and getting rid of a useless burden. The other thought I might prove to be a money-maker. At last it was resolved to keep me until they arrived at the den of two outlaw friends, who bore the singular names of Panhandle Ike and Flat Beak Corbison. 'Ike,' said the villain who was

averse to putting me out of the way, 'has a great head He can tell us if it will pay to hold her for a ransom.'

"It would not have paid," added Cassie, "for I am an orphan, and haven't a thousand dollars to my name."

"Were your captors not pursued?" asked Ted.

"Yes, but we had such a start that the pursuers never came within sight of us. My captors met that dwarf, whose body lies at your feet, and he told about the pursuit, and advised them as to the safest route to reach their destination."

Having heard Cassie Barlow's story, Ted spent no more time in the gully of blood. The horses ridden to the place by the two Flaffstaff murderers were pressed into service, and the young rough rider and the beautiful girl were soon galloping over the desert in the direction of the camp of the troop.

Shortly before noon, and when the heat had become oppressive, they arrived at the camp. But four of the boys were there—Beanpole Perkins, Carl Schwartz, Josiah Durkin and Ben Tremont. Jack Slate, Bud Morgan, Kit Summers, Mark Weston and Doc Fenton had gone to carry out a part of the program which Ted had prepared the night before.

When the boys were made acquainted with the reasons which had induced their leader's return to camp, they threw their hats in the air and shouted their admiration and delight.

"Boys," said Carl Schwartz, "I mofes you dot we oxbress our sentimends py gifing Gabdain Sdrong der vreedom oof dis gamp; und dot a gommiddee pe insdructioned to vait on him ond asg him oof dere's anydings he vants dot he can'd ged it alretty."

"I'll answer that question now," said Ted. "I want you, Carl, for a quick ride. Mount your horse and lope to the settlements, and tell the first officer you meet that there are four bound outlaws in the gully I was just speaking of. Respecting the examination in court, tell him to have it set for the day after to-morrow."

Carl made ready at once and rode off.

Ted then looked at the girl, with a puckered brow.

"You would like to return to Flagstaff as soon as possible, I presume?" he said.

"Yes," was the answer; "but don't let me disturb any of your arrangements."

"I have been prospecting the country about here this forenoon," said Ben Tremont, "and I have discovered an old adobe cabin, a couple of miles to the south, at the foot of the mountains and by the bank of a creek, a branch of the Moen Capie."

"Well," remarked Ted, "what is your suggestion?"

"An old miner lives there, and, from my talk with him, I am satisfied that he is square. He has never been bothered by the outlaws of Arizona, for the reason, probably, that he has nothing worth stealing, and that his cabin is not near any of the regular trails. I would suggest, therefore, that Miss Barlow be escorted there, and that she remain under the old man's protection until we are through with our expedition. After we have settled with Panhandle Ike and Flat Beak Corbison, we can go to the cabin and arrange for the journey to Flagstaff."

"What is the old miner's name?" asked Ted.

"Philetus Alden."

"Philetus Alden!" exclaimed Beanpole Perkins; "why, that is the name of an uncle of mine, who left home twenty years ago to mine in Colorado. Gee! but I'd like to see him! I have heard my mother speak of him often. He was her favorite brother, and she always maintained that a finer man never lived."

Ted Strong's countenance cleared. "You shall accompany Miss Barlow to the cabin," he said, "and—perhaps it might be well for you to remain there until the troop shows up. There are only two men with whom we have to deal, and there are enough of us to manage the affair without you, Perkins."

Beanpole was both pleased and disappointed at this proposed arrangement. He longed to assist in the capture of the pair of desperadoes, and at the same time he viewed with delight the prospect which the trip to the cabin presented. He had been struck in a soft spot by the appearance of the lovely girl, and he knew that a short season of unalloyed delight was open to him.

"I shall not be gone more than two days," said Ted to Cassie Barlow. "I hope the arrangement does not displease you?"

"I am entirely satisfied," she said, with a look that made Ted blush. "I know that I am a burden, and that you are showing me the utmost kindness and consideration. I trust the time will come when I may be able to repay you."

That afternoon Beanpole Perkins, Ted and Miss Barlow mounted horses and rode to the miner's cabin.

Ted went along for the purpose of making sure that Philetus Alden was really the uncle of Perkins, and a man who could be trusted.

In reaching the cabin, they found the door open, and the inmate of the cabin lying moaning upon a rude bunk.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY.

The old man raised himself upon his elbow as Ted Strong entered the cabin.

"What is the matter?" questioned the young rough rider.

"Shot in the leg. Two villains robbed me, and then shot me, so that I could not give the alarm."

"When did this happen?"

"Less than an hour ago. The men have been known to me by sight and reputation for a long time. But they

never bothered me until to-day. I was reading a paper which a cowboy left here yesterday, when Panhandle Ike and Flat Beak Corbison showed their ugly faces at the door. They said they had come to clean me out. Their provisions in their den had run low, and on account of some deviltry they had carried out recently they said they would be obliged to lie low for a while.

"I told them to help themselves, and they did. When they had taken what provisions they needed, the scoundrels asked me if I had any money. I told them that I had a little, and intended to keep it. 'We'll see about that,' said Panhandle Ike, and, upon the words, they seized me, threw me down, and searched my person. Not finding any money, they investigated the cabin. A buckskin purse, containing two hundred dollars in gold, I had hidden in the straw tick on this bunk. The thieves found it, and afterward shot me, out of pure cussedness. Then they rode up the ravine into the mountains.

Ted had observed that the wounded leg was clumsily bandaged, and, with the assistance of Beanpole Perkins, who, with Cassie Barlow, had stood in the doorway while the old man was speaking, the leg was treated in a manner that would have met the approval of a qualified surgeon.

The wound was not a dangerous one, but it would likely keep the old miner confined to the room for some time.

Philetus Alden, white-haired and white-whiskered, had a refined, intelligent countenance, and a gentle, honest expression. Young Perkins felt his heart stir as he regarded him.

"I believe I am your nephew," he said. "My name is Perkins, and my mother's name before her marriage was Alden—Priscilla Alden. She was born and raised in Columbus, Ohio."

The old man listened in surprise and joy. He held out a thin, trembling hand. "You are my nephew, sure enough," he said, with emotion. "I am glad, very glad, to meet you." Beanpole pressed the extended hand warmly, and for a time the two talked of personal matters.

Meanwhile Ted had found a seat for Miss Barlow. Her sympathies had been keenly aroused over the old man's condition and his harsh experiences, and when she had been introduced, and had told her story, Philetus Alden's indignation knew no bounds.

"If I were only able to get about," he said, fiercely, "I would make it hot for those murdering rascals!"

Ted Strong informed the old man that plans were making for the capture of the outlaws.

"It is my opinion," he said, "that Ike and Flat Beak will not attempt to make their cave until nightfall. They have probably found a temporary hiding place in the hills, where they will stay until darkness has set in. I have a good notion to trail them, and try to come upon them to-day. They will not likely look for immediate pursuit, for it will be out of their reckoning that the cabin will have any visitors this noon. There is wood and water here, and I think I will change the camp to this place. As time is precious, and as I want to have a little talk with Mr. Alden about the canyon up which the two villains have ridden, I shall have to ask you, Perkins, to ride back to camp and bring Durkin and Tremont."

Beanpole mounted and rode away. In half an hour he returned with Ben Tremont and the fat boy. Durkin heard stated the new plan which Ted Strong had formed, and commented upon it in this wise: "I scent the battle afar off. My soul's in arms and eager for the fray. Lay on Mike Duff, and danged be he who is not up to snuff!"

The canyon, as Ted, Durkin and Tremont entered it, presented a scene of wild magnificence. Rocky barriers rose up in every direction, and to the stranger it would have seemed inaccessible. But Ted had been posted by Philetus Alden, and, following a faintly defined trail winding along the banks of the small stream which flowed through the canyon, made quick progress. And, as the young rough riders proceeded on their journey of justice, the men they were seeking were seated around a camp fire high up the canyon.

They were smoking their pipes, when a peculiar whistle caused them to prick up their ears. The whistle was repeated. Panhandle Ike answered it. A few moments passed, and then from the trail higher up the canyon four men, mounted on bronchos, appeared.

Their countenances were ugly and sinister, and as they rode down toward the camp fire they were met by the two outlaws Ted Strong was in pursuit of.

"Hades is a-poppin!" said one of the newcomers, as he dismounted. "I thought I'd find you fellows here, and I wanted you to know it."

"What's up, Jim?" asked Corbison.

"Teddy Strong has jumped into ther game with both feet," was the reply. "Not satisfied with putting the San Simon gang out of business, he has butted into the Yavapai country, intendin' to clean out every outfit that the law doesn't recognize."

"An' he's got in his work already," spoke another of the arrivals. "He has knocked out an' corralled five of the best rustlers in Arizona. I seen the place of ther scrimmage. It's in a gully on the way to your den, Flat Beak."

"Ther rough riders are not romancin' up that way now, are they?" asked Panhandle Ike, in some alarm.

"No," replied the first speaker. "They are in camp twelve miles this side of the spot where the circus took place. I reckon Teddy intends to make a raid on the den to-night or to-morrow."

"Then we better get a quick move on!" said Flat Beak Corbison.

"No, hurry," remarked the man called "Jim," "for they

won't likely move before dark, and you can make the cave by the cut-off over this canyon in a couple of hours. Wait until the sun goes down, and then light out. Pete and me will go with you. I want to have a hand in this pie, because this interferin', stuck-up kid has downed my best friend, Col. Bob Basket."

When the newcomers arrived, Ted Strong and his friends were near the spot. For some time they had proceeded on foot, leading their horses.

At last, when not more than half a mile of canyon was left to traverse, Ted called a halt.

"It's time for a little scouting," he said. "Stay here, and I'll steal forward and see if I can locate our quarry."

He was absent ten minutes, and returned with the information that the outlaws had been located. And there were six of them, instead of two.

"The more, the merrier," said Ben Tremont. "If we can get the drop on them, we are all right."

It was determined to secure the horses at the point where they now were, and go forward on foot.

When they were so close to the outlaws that they could hear the sound of their voices, Ted whispered: "We have got to take these fellows by surprise. They are all sitting under a huge bowlder. I believe it will be possible for me to sneak along the bank and get behind that bowlder at the top. The rocks and brush that line the canyon's sides will permit a safe trip. You boys crawl forward until you are able to see the five men, and remain in concealment until I give the signal to rush forward."

"What kind of a signal will you give?" asked Ben Tremont.

"A shot from my pistol and the rough riders' yell."

Ted had discarded his fool's dress upon reaching camp, after his adventure in the gully, and was now wearing his brown khaki uniform. He had overheard what Panhandle Ike's and Flat Beak Corbison's new allies had said about him, and was not unwilling that they should soon make his acquaintance, under conditions that should make a lasting impression upon their memory, in the event that they should escape the coming conflict with their lives.

He reached his coign of vantage at the top of the bowlder without having been discovered.

Cautiously peering over it, he saw that all the men were huddled together about the fire.

The newcomers were stalwart fellows, and each was well armed. At the moment Ted arrived at the bowlder the outlaws were talking in ordinary tones, but soon afterward, and for some reason which he failed to understand, the voices fell until he was unable to distinguish a syllable.

Suddenly two of the newcomers, the man called "Jim" and another, whom Panhandle Ike had addressed as Big Luke, arose and went out of sight up the canyon.

Ted had a good look at Big Luke. He was a man to be feared. He was over six feet in height, and with the proportions of a Hercules. His face resembled a bulldog's, and his low forehead, small eyes and thick, coarse lips betrayed the ruffian and the brute.

As he started off, he smiled, displaying a set of teeth that would not have been out of place in the jaws of a grizzly bear.

The unlooked-for departure of the two men was disconcerting.

Ted could not tell whether they intended soon to return or had gone off for good.

At any rate, he must wait a while before beginning offensive operations.

Five minutes passed, and the young rough rider was leaning over the bowlder, trying to hear what the three men remaining were saying to each other, when something happened that was not down on the program.

The huge bowlder, which was not deeply imbedded in the soil of the bank, but rested lightly upon it, suddenly gave way under the young rough rider's weight and went rolling down upon the desperadoes below.

As the bowlder started on its downward trip, Ted tried to save himself, but without avail. The big rock struck the bed of the canyon with a crash that was followed by a shriek of the direst agony. The next instant Ted was flung full tilt against Panhandle Ike, causing the little ruffian's head to seek the ground with force sufficient to relieve him for the time of all sense.

Ted's own head received a thump on a rock as he went down, and before he could get his wits together Flat Beak Corbison and the other living members of the villainous quartet had thrown themselves upon him. Despite his weakness and the disadvantage under which he was placed, he fought desperately.

But the odds were too great, and he was soon at the mercy of his enemies. Stout thongs of leather held his arms and legs.

Before the bowlder descended there were four men sitting by the camp fire. Three had escaped injury. The fourth, in the track of the immense mass of rock, had been crushed to death. The body lay under the bowlder, and it was impossible to remove it.

"Gila Bill's croakin's on you!" said Corbison, bending a malignant look on Ted.

Panhandle Ike, sitting up and rubbing his head, put in a remark: "An' I shore owe this kindergarten butter one myself! It's you to ther boneyard, all right!" he added, nodding ferociously at the prisoner.

At this moment a shout from down the canyon made Flat Beak Corbison give utterance to a yell that could have been heard half a mile away. It was full of fierce triumph.

Ted Strong's heart sank. It was evident that his friends had met with misfortune.

There were more shouts from below, and presently Big

Luke and Jim appeared, bringing in as prisoners Josiah Durkin and Ben Tremont. The lads had been caught unawares. While they were having eyes only for the scene at the camp fire, and were waiting feverishly for Ted's signal, Big Luke and his companion had stolen upon them from behind, and had seized them before they could make a move in resistance.

Big Luke, while talking to his ruffianly associates by the fire, had seen the head of Josiah, who, in his anxiety to see clearly what the desperadoes were doing, had incautiously exposed himself. The flank movement which proved so successful was then undertaken.

The leader of the young rough riders looked up into two sorry faces.

"We're a brace of chumps," said Ben Tremont, shamefacedly. "If we had had sense, we would have looked behind as well as in front, and then there would have been another story to tell."

"That's all right," returned Ted, cheerfully. "We mustn't expect to take every trick in the game of life. It's the general average that counts. I myself have made a mistake. I was betting on a rock of which I knew nothing."

"Say," remarked Big Luke, with a murderous scowl, "you interestin' passel of breakfast-food infants seem ter be almighty chipper, considerin' that yer trunks air checked for Hades by ther lightnin' limited, which leaves in——" he paused, and fixed an inquiring look on Flat Beak Corbison's ugly countenance.

"We've shore got the captain an' two of his troop," said Corbison, as he showed his yellow teeth in a savage grin; "and the nex' question afore this pra'rful meetin' house is. What sort of a send-off shall we deal out to 'em? Panhandle, hev you any entertainin' idee ter spring onto us?"

"How would a bonfire do?" suggested the little ruffian.

"Bonfire suits me," said he of the flat beak. "Does that thar proposition strike you as fittin' to ther occasion, Luke?"

"Kill 'em first, an' burn 'em afterwards. That's my idee."

"The idee goes."

CHAPTER VI.

CASSIE SCENTS TREACHERY.

Ted Strong's face twitched when he heard the decision of Flat Beak Corbison. He was not the youth to despair while time held out the slightest promise of relief. But he now saw, by the faces of his captors, that his death and the death of his two friends was a matter of minutes. And he was utterly helpless. He would not have repined could he have died fighting. But to be shot down with his hands tied—the bare thought made him shudder.

Ben Tremont and Josiah Durkin each turned as pale as death when their horrible sentence had been pronounced. They looked at Ted Strong, and then he, to infuse a courage that should impress the dastards who were gloating over the situation of their captives, said, quietly and impressively: "The medicine is not to our liking, but let us take it like men."

As he spoke, his eyes sought the ground. There he beheld something which brought the blood to his cheeks and sent hope to his heart. The outlaw whose life had been crushed out by the falling bowlder had been whittling with a knife when the rock fell.

Protruding from the bottom of the bowlder was the right hand of the dead man, and lying beside it was the knife.

Ted, who had been standing up, sat down quickly, threw one foot over the knife, and, putting his hands to his face, began to sob as if his heart would break.

The five desperadoes laughed uproariously.

"He's a-goin' ter brace up an' take his medicine!" jeered Big Luke; "an' this is ther way he's er doin' it! That's right, kid; hev a good cry, an' perhaps yer mammy won't spank you!"

Ted sobbed the harder.

Then he said, huskily, without looking up: "Will one of you gentlemen get me a drink of water?"

"You'll shore need a powerful lot of water where you're goin', but you won't get it none!" remarked the man called Jim.

"I'll accommodate yer, sonny," said Flat Beak Corbison, "and then we'll stand you up agin' a tree an' hev a little target practice."

Ted, looking through his fingers, saw Corbison take a tin cup and go down to the little creek, a few rods away, and saw, also, to his inexpressible joy, the other men draw aside and talk earnestly together.

Bending his body, his hands grasped the handle of the knife. It was a bowie, and as sharp as a razor. One cut, and his hands were free. Another, and the thongs fell from his ankles.

He was free, and he exulted, though he might never be permitted to make effective use of his freedom, for he was unarmed.

The four desperadoes stood on the other side of the bowlder, and near the bank. The arms they had taken from their prisoners lay upon a flat rock at the bottom of the bank, and some three feet from the spot where they were standing.

How to reach the weapons was the problem that now concerned the leader of the young rough riders.

Crawling forward a few feet, he looked around the bowlder, and saw that Flat Beak Corbison, back toward him, was going down the creek, instead of returning to the camp. The reason for this action was readily understood. He had found an insufficient flow of water in

the creek opposite the camping place, and had gone further down, where there was a pool.

This circumstance determined Ted's course of action.

There were many stones, some of goodly size, lying on the ground where he was sitting.

With one in each hand, he jumped to his feet, at the same time sending forth a yell that would have put to blush the most ambitious efforts of a Comanche.

The four desperadoes in consultation started back in amazement. As they did so, the stones flew. Each hit the mark, and two of the villains went down.

Before the others could recover from their surprise, Ted was on them. He was fighting for his life, and his fists, in whirlwind fashion, sought the most vulnerable points on the bodies of his enemies.

A bullet whizzed past his head as the last man of the four struck the rocky ground with a thud. Flat Beak Corbison had turned about to take a hand.

Ted grabbed up two revolvers from the pile on the flat rock, and, ducking behind the bowlder, found an opening for pistol work, and let drive at the villain who had gone for water.

The bullet struck the tin cup, and sent it clattering on the rocks. Another shot made Flat Beak drop his revolver and howl with pain. The bullet had shattered the bones in his wrist.

Now Ted looked around, to see if the villains on the ground in his rear required further attention. One of them did. He was sitting up, and reaching out for his pistol, which had dropped from his hand at the moment of Ted's assault. "Quit that!" was the stern command; "or I'll put your light out!"

The disgruntled desperado placed his hand in his pocket.

The young rough rider fixed his eyes on Ben Tremont and Josiah Durkin, who were sitting on the ground beyond the bowlder and toward the creek.

"Bully for you!" shouted Ben Tremont. "Wish I could help you!"

"Same here!" added Durkin.

"I'll give you a chance," replied Ted. He threw toward them the knife which had done him such good service. It lighted near Ben's feet.

Ted mounted the bowlder, a pistol in each hand.

Flat Beak Corbison was stooping down to regain the weapon which he had been forced to drop. A sharp warning from the young rough rider induced him to straighten up again.

By this time Ben Tremont and the fat boy had cut their thongs. "Get your guns," commanded their leader. "I'll see that you are not interfered with."

As the boys moved forward toward the flat rock, Ted said to Corbison: "March up here, so that I may face the whole kit of you! Come, step lively, or I'll put your other hand out of commission!"

The four men by the bank were now showing evidence that they were alive. But they made no move to prevent Ted's companions from regaining possession of their weapons.

They had too much respect for the prowess of the intrepid youth on top of the bowlder. After Ben and Josiah had armed themselves, Ted issued his orders.

"Ben," said he, "tie up Flat Beak. Durkin and I will hold down the balance of the outfit while you are at your work. And, Flat Beak, don't you make any resistance! It won't be healthy for you to do so!"

Corbison, who had been engaged in tying up his wounded wrist, growled out something which Ted could not hear.

But the outlaw submitted quietly to the tying process. His case attended to, Ted ordered Ben and Josiah to operate on the wrists and ankles of the other desperadoes.

"I'll superintend the work from up here," he announced; "and, if anybody gets fresh, I'll proceed to salt him."

As the words were spoken, Big Luke, whose hand had been at his head, covering the lump created by the stone which Ted had thrown, sank back against the bank, and began to groan. "Perhaps his skull is cracked," thought Ted.

Panhandle Ike and the other two ruffians, who were sitting up, submitted quietly while Ben and Josiah, with thongs in their hands, carried out their young leader's orders.

But, as they moved toward Big Luke, they met with a surprise.

They were bending over him, he seemingly in violent, agonizing pain, when, with a lightning-like movement, his head and body lifted, and two arms, with giant muscles, shot out.

The young rough riders' heads were knocked together, and they were thrust aside, to lie bruised and senseless.

Ted Strong, upon the bowlder, blazed away as his friends went down. The bullet must have taken effect, but the enraged giant kept his feet.

With a roar like that of a grizzly bear, he let drive with his own revolver, and then, in the face of almost certain death, scrambled up the bowlder.

Ted Strong, with the blood running down his cheeks, swayed a moment, tried to take aim at the shaggy head of his terrible adversary, when his knees suddenly gave way, a deadly faintness stole over him, and he sank down upon the bowlder, just as Big Luke mounted it.

The burly ruffian kicked the body of the brave youth, who had made such a gallant fight against odds.

"If you're not dead, you soon will be!" grunted the victor.

Below, Flat Beak Corbison, in a rich baritone, and Panhandle Ike, in a husky tenor, were singing a duet:

"Oh, ain't I glad ter git outer ther wilderness,
Outer ther wilderness, outer ther wilderness,
Oh, ain't I glad ter git outer ther wilderness
Down in Allergazam.

"Johnny stole a ham an' gin it to his mother,
His mother spanked him hard and then he stole another.

"Oh, ain't I glad, etc."

"If you measly mavericks had done your part in this blood-lettin' shindy," said Big Luke, contemptuously, "thar'd hev been an end of it long before this!"

His voice grew faint as he concluded this speech, and, with his hand to his heart, he settled down to his knees.

The villains, who had been congratulating themselves over an apparent victory, now became filled with uneasiness and fear. They shouted to Big Luke, but he made no answer. Huddled up on the bowlder, with his head bowed in his hands, he seemed to be oblivious of all earthly things.

For some moments he remained in this position. Then his body stiffened, and, without a sound, he toppled off the big rock to the ground, and lay still.

"Luke!" called out Panhandle Ike. "Are yer dead?"

No voice replied; there was no movement of the body.

Flat Beak Corbison made the air blue with curses. "Ther big chump might as well hev kep' his fins outer the pie!" he snarled. "We're shore wuss off than we was before! He's croaked, an' here we be, trussed up like sheep, an' no one, enemy or friend, to cut us loose! We'll starve ter death, an' ther coyotes will pick our bones!"

Big Luke was, indeed, dead. The bullet from Ted Strong's revolver had pierced a vital part. That death had not been instantaneous was due to the man's rugged constitution.

"Air ye figgerin' that ther chucklin' tads that tied us up air outer ther runnin'?" said Panhandle Ike.

"Sure."

"Then just cast yer optical illushuns over yon, an' then take a new deal!"

Corbison looked where his evil companion was pointing, and saw that the two young rough riders were sitting up, and gazing about them in a bewildered way.

"I dunno whether ter be sorry or glad," remarked Corbison, as he noted that the supposed dead men were very much alive. "I reckon it's a choice between ther fryin' pan an' ther fire."

Ben Tremont, with brain in fair working order, looked from the living outlaws to the two motionless forms. In spite of all efforts at self-control, he sobbed aloud.

"Poor Ted is dead!" he said to Josiah Durkin; "and I wish I were dead, too!"

"Maybe he is still alive," returned the fat boy. "Let's go up and see."

They arose to their feet and staggered toward the bowlder.

Ben Tremont was the first to reach the body of their commander. He knelt down, felt of the pulse and pressed his ear over the heart.

With a shout of joy, he announced that Ted's heart was faintly beating.

Josiah Durkin felt as if a mountain had been lifted from his breast.

The unconscious youth was lifted from the bowlder and carried down to the water.

His head and face were bathed, the blood washed away and some spirits from a flask taken from Ben's pocket were forced down his throat.

In a few moments he revived, and presently sat up.

Josiah Durkin, who had been examining the wound, exclaimed: "You're all right, Ted! The skull is intact; only the scalp is injured. The bullet plowed a ridge along the temple, and I suppose the shock put you out of business for the time."

Ted smiled. "It was a close call, though. And how is Big Luke?"

"Your shot was surer," said Ben Tremont. "He is deader than a mackerel."

Ten minutes later the three young rough riders were in condition to resume business at the old stand.

The horses of the outlaws were found, and the four prisoners were strapped each upon a horse, and the march down the canyon was commenced. The boys came upon their own steeds where they had left them, and then the order of march was changed. Ben Tremont went in advance, leading the animal upon which the desperado called Jim was mounted. After him came Josiah Durkin, as guard for Jim's crony, who, it was afterward ascertained, bore the name of Moqui Pete. There was Indian blood in his veins, and his complexion was coppery.

Bringing up the rear, Ted Strong chaperoned Flat Beak Corbison and Panhandle Ike.

The party of captors and prisoners reached the cabin of Philetus Alden shortly before dusk. Beanpole Perkins and Cassie Barlow were at the door as the strange cavalcade rode up.

"Hooray for Ted Strong!" yelled Beanpole. "And hooray for Ben and Fatty!"

"Leave us out," said Ben. "We weren't in it for a minute."

"They were in it so well," insisted Ted, "that I might be a dead one now but for them."

The story of the trip up the canyon was being told when Carl Schwartz rode up. With him came a sandy-haired man, in a buckskin suit. He wore long, sweeping mustaches, and his sharp eyes glistened when they fell upon the prisoners.

Carl introduced him as the constable of the settlements, named Tom Menton.

"When was this yer haul made?" he asked. Ted briefly told him.

"Panhandle Ike, Flat Beak Corbison, Jim Kane and Moqui Pete. That's shore a rattlin' good rakedown. If you'd er corralled Big Luke an' Gila Bill, you'd er had er full hand."

"Bill an' Luke hev passed in their checks," said Flat Beak Corbison, with a scowl.

Constable Tom Menton started, and his mouth twitched at this announcement. Turning to Ted, he said: "I takes off my hat to ther champeen rogue catcher of ther Territory. I thought I was some punkins myself, but I lays down my hand to ther boy in khaki. An' now, as my time is short, I'll take charge of this yer layout an' purceed ter escort 'em to ther big calaboose."

As an officer of the county, the constable was entitled to the possession of the outlaws. Ted could interpose no valid objection to the proposed move. But he said:

"It will be safer to have some one go with you. My head is splitting, or I would gladly accompany you to the settlements. Ben, you shall go in my place."

"I won't need any help," said the officer, a touch of scorn in his voice. "If I can't take keer of four tied-up rascals, they havin' no arms and no chance to use 'em if they hed 'em, then you alls oughter put me ter bed an' call in a nurse ter dose me with smoothin' syrup. If you insist, it'll hev ter go, I reckon, but my pride tells me ter play a lone hand."

The constable's virtuously aggrieved look made Ted laugh.

"All right," he said. "It's solitaire, if you say so."

The four prisoners had listened to this conversation with marked interest. They appeared to be relieved when it was announced that the constable would not be accompanied by Ben Tremont.

"Thar'll be er perliminary examination," said Tom Menton, as he prepared to depart with the villainous quartet; "an', arter it's over, I'll hev ter take ther four-flush outfit ter Prescott. If ther troop wants ter meander along with me, I'll shore be pleased."

"It's a whack," returned Ted.

The officer and his prisoners were scarcely out of hearing, when Cassie Barlow stepped up to Ted, and said, earnestly: "I think you have made a mistake."

"How, Miss Barlow?"

"I don't trust that constable. I believe he is in league with the outlaws."

The young rough rider caught his breath. The words of the girl set his wits to working. They had been dulled by the shock of the bullet which had grazed his temple, but in an instant they were as sharp as ever. The constable had not impressed him, and, if he had been clear-headed when Menton appeared on the scene, he would have insisted on sending such an escort as would have prevented any treacherous action on the officer's part.

But, if a mistake had been made, it might not be too late to rectify it.

After bathing his head anew and tying a bandage about it, Ted called to Ben and Carl, and all three mounted and galloped after the four desperadoes and the constable.

Beanpole Perkins, with a sour face, saw his comrades ride off.

"It will be three against five," he growled, "and Ted half sick, besides."

"Go with them," urged Cassie. "I'll be safe here. I am armed, and am not afraid."

Beanpole hesitated a moment, and then said: "It isn't the square thing, but, still, I think I ought to go."

"I can shoot," came the voice of Philetus Alden, inside the cabin. "We'll be all right. Jump on your horse and help your friends out."

Beanpole hesitated no longer. His horse was saddled, and he was soon making the sand fly on the road to the settlements.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ADVENTURE IN THE DEN.

The cabin of Philetus Alden was five miles from the settlements, and the road, or trail, instead of following the edge of the desert all the way, made a cut-off between two buttes after about two miles of desert, reaching the sandy plains again when within three-quarters of a mile of the collection of houses, shacks and mud caverns which constituted a village and supported a constable and a calaboose.

Tom Menton and the four outlaws had several minutes start of Ted Strong and his comrades, and these minutes were made the most of. Upon leaving Alden's place, the five bronchos were put through their paces so that the riders were not far from the ravine cut-off when the young rough riders started after them.

To satisfy himself that Tom Menton was a friend of Flat Beak Corbison and his partners in crime, Ted fired off his pistol several times when he was sure that the reports would be overheard by the five horsemen in his front.

Heads were turned, but no stop was made. On the contrary, the treacherous officer and the outlaws went forward the faster.

The ravine had many twists, and, on entering it, Ted called a short halt.

"Boys," said he, "the scoundrels may ambush us, if we ride along the trail. The lowest butte is neither high nor steep, and I'm going to ride over it on Black Bess, while you stay here and wait for a signal. If the way is clear, I will wave my hand. If there is a trap in advance, I will fold my arms. Luckily, there are no trees on the buttes, so you can see me plainly from the summit."

As he rode up the butte, Beanpole Perkins came into view.

Ted saw him, and shook his head.

The members of the troop waited in anxious expectancy.

The young rough rider reached the summit, and Black Bess came to a standstill. For several moments horse and rider remained stationary. Suddenly Ted waved his hand, and then disappeared over the brow of the butte.

The three rough riders put spurs to their animals and went on a swift lope along the trail.

A ride of half a mile brought them to their leader, who had halted at the mouth of a canyon which intersected the ravine and terminated high up in the hills beyond the buttes.

Darkness was falling, and Ted's countenance wore an angry expression.

"They have given us the double cross, boys," he said. "They have not taken the road to the settlements, but have gone up that canyon. To follow them now would be an act of foolhardiness. Before we could get to where they now are it would be dark. They know the country, and we don't."

"What's to be done?" asked Beanpole Perkins.

"We will be forced to carry out the original program," replied Ted. "The other members of the troop and Mark Weston are now stationed at points which I designated when I unfolded the plan to capture Panhandle Ike and Flat Beak Corbison in the cave. Now, my idea is that Menton and his quartet will try to make that cave tonight. They can reach it by a roundabout way, and so as to avoid the settlements. They are without sufficient arms, and they have no provisions. The cave, probably, is supplied with both. And, besides, it offers more security than these barren mountains."

"Won't it be rather risky to play the idiot? Seems to me these villains will be on the lookout for some trick. I'd try another plan, if I were you," said Perkins.

"We can never rout them out of the cave, unless one of us effects an entrance while they are away or by means of a subterfuge. I can think of nothing more feasible than the idiot scheme. It is now well known all over the country hereabout that the troop has lost its idiot mascot. The men we are after may suspect a snare, but they will make sure that it is a snare before laying violent hands upon a person who bears every appearance of being a natural. It is a fact of which there have been countless demonstrations, through thousands of years, that even the most depraved of human beings have ever had pity and kind consideration for the mentally unfortunate."

Ted thought a moment, and then said, with a kindling eye: "I've struck it. I may not have to play the idiot, after all. I am going to try to reach that cave before the arrival there of Flat Beak Corbison and his gang. Because they have gone up this canyon, they will have to go considerably out of the way to get to the cave. I'll ride back to camp, don my disguise, as a matter of precaution, and, with you, Ben, make a straight shoot for the cave. At the foot of the mountain we will part, I to make the rest of the journey on foot, you to take Black Bess back to the cabin. Come on, boys. On the way I'll talk of other arrangements in which you three shall have parts."

About midnight Ted Strong, disguised as the idiot, toiled up the mountain toward the mouth of the cave that served as an impregnable retreat for the Arizona outlaws.

The night was not dark, and he made his way upward with confidence and celerity.

Half an hour's climb brought him to the entrance of the underground stronghold. There was no obstruction to prevent his passage into the interior. The mouth was small, just large enough to permit one person to squeeze through, but beyond the mouth was a rocky chamber, occpying a space of more than thirty feet in diameter. Against the wall, near a point where the cave deflected narrowly, to open at some distance beyond in a beautiful grotto, was a formidable collection of arms and accouterments of war. Beyond, in a corner, was a supply of canned goods, meats and other provisions.

Ted, to see clearly, had lighted a candle which he had brought with him, but he did not make an immediate investigation of the guns, pistols and rifles. He must first make sure that the outlaws were not in any part of the cave

Leaving the chamber which might be regarded as an immense vestibule, he went along the narrow passage and came into the grotto. Here were the sleeping quarters. There were bear and panther skins, mattresses stuffed with leaves and grass, several camp chairs, a small table, candles, articles of clothing and the odds and ends of men's headquarters.

Without the grotto, and lower down, Ted could hear the trickling of water. Pursuing his journey, he went out of the grotto through a fairly wide opening which terminated shortly at the brink of a chasm.

Holding his candle so that he could look down, the investigating youth saw that the water came from crevices in the rocks, and that it flowed into a pool which would have filled and overflowed but for a thin outlet which pierced the mountain on one side.

Beyond the pool was an opening as narrow as the one which led from the vestibule to the grotto. For the purpose of reaching it, a rope ladder had been provided. Ted descended, arrived at the opening, passed along it, and, going downward, making many turns, came at last to the outlet on the other side of the mountain.

It was closed, but the hinges on the huge rock which formed the door could be plainly seen.

The young rough rider did not try to open the door. The outlaws might use this means of entrance to the cave, and might be near at hand at this very moment, and, should he push back the rock, they might hear the noise and cut loose with the rifle and revolvers which Constable Tom Menton carried.

Ted listened intently for a few moments, looked about the large, open space by the outlet, saw that it was used as a stable. and then took the back track for the vestibule.

Now he began an inspection of the assortment of arms. Every weapon was loaded. There were two score of them, and for some time Ted was busily engaged in withdrawing the charges from the chambers, and rendering the guns, pistols and rifles powerless for harm. This work done, he stationed himself in a niche in the opening beyond the grotto and close to the chasm which held the pool. Extinguishing his candle, he waited for the coming of the outlaws.

There was the possibility that he might not find it necessary to play the part of the idiot.

His examination of the cave had changed the aspect of affairs,

Concealed in the niche above the pool, he might be able to overcome each desperado as he came up the ladder.

In the vestibule Ted had found a heavy, iron bar, and he hoped he might find opportunity to use it in an effective manner.

The time passed slowly. The young rough rider had about made up his mind that the outlaws did not intend to make use of the cave, when the low sound of voices was heard above the noise of the water.

Flat Beak Corbison and his villainous comrades were approaching. Soon a light appeared.

Ted dared not peer out, but he gripped his iron club and waited, with nerves on edge.

The voices could now be heard distinctly. Constable Tom Menton was speaking.

"Unless we can clean out every last one of these riptearin' kids, it's me to ther land of ther Greasers!" he said, in a sourly complaining voice. "Of course, I shore had ter stand in with you alls, but with Mister Teddy Strong's karkey-larkeys around an' kickin', my days as gardeen of ther people's peace goes a-shootin' up ther flume."

"We've put our mark on one," said Panhandle Ike, "an' that's a beginnin'. Take it easy, old son, and we'll make each one of ther sassy youngsters turn up his toes."

Ted Strong felt a chill about the region of his heart. What did Panhandle Ike mean when he said that the mark had been put on one of the troop? Could it be that one of his brave comrades had been killed? If so, where had the killing been done, and who was the victim?

"I'm goin' to have a dash at that water before I tackle that thar ladder," remarked Tom Menton. "I'm as dry as a fish. If it hadn't been that we had ter skip ther settlements, we could have brought some whisk along."

"I reckon we all will hev ter imbibe with you," said Flat Beak Corbison. Then followed the sound of splashing water. Moments passed, and then Corbison's voice was again heard. What he said caused all the blood to leave Ted Strong's face.

"We are shore shy on cups," he said, "an', therefore, if you air hankerin' arter a liquid refresh, Miss Barlow, you'll hev ter squat down an' do ther Injun act, like ther rest of us."

"I do not care to drink," was the cold reply.

Cassie Barlow a prisoner! What had happened at the cabin of Philetus Alden? There had been an attack on the place, that was evident. This explained the delay of the outlaws in reaching the cave. They had hidden in the canyon until after dark, then had ridden back to the cabin and—the brave youth shuddered at the thought of what had probably occurred. While he and Ben Tremont had been on their way on horseback, to the foot of the mountain, the five desperadoes had appeared at the cabin, and perhaps killed Beanpole Perkins and the old miner, and then made prisoner of the girl.

The grip on the iron bar became fiercer. Ted's lips were shut tightly, and there was that in his expression which boded no good to the villains below him.

"Go ahead, Flat Beak," said Menton. "I'm shore loaded up with Adam's ale, an' now I'm ready ter tackle some feed."

Corbison walked to the ladder and started to ascend.

CHAPTER VIII.

TED IN THE ROLE OF A SPIDER.

An attack on the cabin had been made, and this is what happened:

On leaving the cut-off between the buttes to go up the canyon, the outlaws' intention had been to make a detour and ride to the cave. The darkness induced a feeling of security, and, after Ted Strong and his comrades had abandoned the pursuit and ridden toward the cabin, Panhandle Ike spoke the words which caused a change in the program.

"Boys," said he, "it's up to us ter wipe out ther disgrace of ther arternoon. We've been licked by a parcel of pulin' thumb suckers. I shore wants ter kick myself whenever I thinks of ther ridickylous doin's up t'other canyon. Our rep is gone unless we kin make good by wipin' out Teddy an' his droolin' kindergartens. Tom, here, sports a rifle, two pistols and a knife. Thar's weapons fer four. Thar's only four kids at ther cabin, maybe not so many, for some of 'em may not have stayed thar. What's ther matter with ridin' back thar an' givin' 'em a picnic? We will shore hev ther advantage, fer they won't be lookin' fer us, an' likely will be inside ther cabin, castin' sheep's eyes at that beaut of a girl. Sufferin' Moses, but she's a peach! Say, if we can only lay out the kids an' cabbage ther girl, the cave will hev a mistress. What we shore needs in our palashul retreat is ther ennoblin' inflooence of fair woman's sassiety."

"Ther gal ain't a bad prize package," Tom Menton admitted. "Not bein' a married man myself, I wouldn't fall dead if she concluded ter hitch with me. How does she strike you, Flat Beak?"

Corbison shifted a big quid of tobacco, blinked his small eyes, and said: "As ther Adonis of this yer aggergashun of manly worth an' beauty, I coppers ther remarks of my frien', ther constable. If my lovely frontispiece doesn't immejetly capture her maiden fancy, then I'm a liar by ther watch!"

The ugly-visaged outlaw grinned, and his companions laughed. "We'll all enter ther race," said Panhandle Ike, "an' may ther best man—an' that's me—win ther prize."

After waiting a while longer, the five desperadoes rode back to the cut-off, and then slowly proceeded in the direction of the old miner's cabin.

Ted Strong and Ben Tremont had been gone about ten minutes when they arrived in sight of the structure.

All was silent about the place.

Dismounting near a stunted cottonwood about three hundred yards from the cabin, the outlaws secured their horses, and then stole forward on foot. On the side of the cabin looking toward the trail was a small window. There were no curtains, and the light of the candle within the room cast a reflection upon a few feet of space beneath the window.

Flat Beak Corbison, who acted as leader of the villainous quintet, called a halt when within fifty feet of the door.

"I'll sneak around and get under that thar window," he whispered. "Maybe I kin git a chance ter peek inside an' git ther lay of ther land. It's important that we should know fer sartin how many of these yer kids we've got ter go up against."

He moved noiselessly away, and his allies, with weapons ready for instant use, watched and waited.

They saw him reach a point under the window where the light did not reach, and they also saw him cautiously raise his head and look inside. One short moment he looked, and then quickly dropped to his knees.

It was evident that his presence had not been discovered, for no demonstration followed his risky movement.

Presently he rejoined his comrades.

"We're on velvet," he whispered. "Only the gal an' one kid. The old man's laid up an' don't count."

"How'll we do ther trick?" asked Panhandle Ike.

"I'll go back under ther window an' you'll go to ther door and knock. Ther kid'll git up to see who's thar, an' when he does I'll cut loose an' git him. Soon's I fire you bu'st in ther door an' ther rest of ther boys can come a-runnin'."

This program was adopted without argument.

Panhandle Ike crept to the door and knocked softly. Beanpole Perkins, the only member of Ted Strong's troop in the cabin—Carl Schwartz having gone off a short time before to carry out instructions given by his leader—left the chair in which he had been sitting and moved toward the door.

Before he reached it Cassie Barlow, whose suspicions had become aroused, said quickly, in a low voice: "Ask who it is before you open the door."

Young Perkins nodded his head. At the door he called out: "Who's there?"

At this moment Flat Beak Corbison pulled the trigger of his revolver. The glass of the window deflected the course of the bullet, and it struck the wall close to Perkins' head.

With an oath Corbison smashed the glass with his elbow, and through the aperture thus made fired again.

The young rough rider, who was feeling for his own weapon, received the leaden ball in his breast, and, staggering backward, fell heavily at the feet of the girl.

The door was burst open and Panhandle Ike and the other outlaws rushed in.

Sitting upon the bunk was the old miner. In his hand was a pistol, but he had failed to make it work. Something was the matter with the hammer. Two shots were fired, and Philetus Alden sank back upon the pillow and ceased to breathe. Cassie Barlow would have made a determined fight for liberty if her arms had not been caught by Tom Menton the moment after his entrance into the room.

The girl's arms were bound, and then the murderers left the scene of blood.

Three hours ride, Cassie Barlow mounted upon the horse of Beanpole Perkins, and the secret entrance to the cave was reached.

What occurred after the arrival at the pool is known to the reader.

Flat Beak Corbison ascended the ladder and found a footing on the rocky space of the passageway above.

Standing up so that his form could be seen by those below him, he said: "Now, let Miss Barlow try ther rope."

"I prefer to go last," she said, firmly.

"I'm er thinkin' she likes our company better'n she likes yourn, Flat Beak," chuckled Tom Menton.

Corbison rejoined, in anger: "I'm ther main squeeze in this yer combine, an' what I says goes! You'll come up this ladder, miss, or I'll slide down an' take you up by force!"

Ted Strong, hearing this speech, would have sprung out and cracked the speaker's skull if he had not been guided by a sense of prudence. To attack the leader of the outlaws now would be to expose himself, and perhaps spoil all. Once away from the light, and Flat Beak's case could be attended with much less danger.

Cassie Barlow paid no attention to Corbison's command. She stood by the pool, looking up into his face, with an expression of contemptuous defiance.

There ensued a short period of silence.

Panhandle Ike broke it. "Suppose we give her a cold bath, Flat Beak? Maybe that will shore bring her to her senses an' show her that we mean business."

"If she ain't on that ladder in one minute, go ahead an' duck her," was Corbison's wrathful ultimatum.

The minute passed. Cassie Barlow did not move.

Panhandle Ike laid his hand on her arm. "It's pretty cold, miss," he said, "but we'll let you off with one duck." He tried to drag her forward, but her hands—freed since her arrival in the cave—clutched him by the throat.

"Take her off—take her off!" gasped the little ruffian. "She——" He could say no more for the pressure about the region of the windpipe was not conducive to speech.

Tom Menton and Jim Kane caught her roughly by the wrists and made her release her strangle hold on Flat Beak Corbison's ill-favored partner.

Ted Strong, out of the niche, and so close to Corbison that he could have touched him, rejoiced inwardly when

he saw that the move to carry out Corbison's dastardly order had resulted in failure.

Had the danger of ducking been imminent, he would have cast caution to the winds and gone to the courageous girl's rescue. He was back in the niche when the next words were spoken.

"You better waltz down an' take her," advised Tom Menton. "This yer duckin' proposition ain't what it's cracked up ter be. If we make another try, like as not one of us will slip inter ther water with her. I ain't er yearnin' ter take a bath, for ther water is shore cold enough ter freeze yer liver!"

"All right," responded Corbison, grimly.

He turned and came to his hands and his knees for the purpose of backing down the ladder. Now his eyes, sweeping that small section of the passageway that was not in darkness, caught sight of Ted Strong's feet, which the owner had unconsciously protruded beyond the area of the niche.

In an instant he reached back and grasped his revolver.

At the same moment, Ted, who supposed that by this time the leader of the outlaws was out of sight down the ladder, took occasion to look out.

It was well that he did so. What he saw was productive of a lightning-like movement. Before Flat Beak Corbison could fire, Ted's pistol spoke. There followed a yell of pain, and then the light went out, and both the passageway and the large cavity by the pool were in utter darkness.

For a full minute there was silence. Then from below came this question from Panhandle Ike, the voice betraying agitation and fear: "What's up? Who's thar? Or was it an accident?"

The last words gave Ted his cue. Assuming that Corbison was either dead or unconscious, he crawled to the edge of the chasm, and, imitating Corbison's voice, said, faintly: "I've shot myself! The blame gun was in my way, an' I was tryin' ter git out o' my pocket, when it went off an' caught me in ther stomach. I'm a dead one, all right!"

"That's hard luck, shore!" said the little ruffian, "an' we are in hard luck, too. That thar spiteful tiger cat of a Miss Barlow—I'm shore goin' ter wring her neck in a minute!—grabbed the candle outer Jim Kane's hand an' threw it into the pool. We ain't got no other candle, an' thar ain't a match in ther crowd. When me an' Jim an' Pete were searched by them upstartin' primer readers, we were skinned to ther limit. An' Tom Menton is shy himself. Tried to light a cigarette a while ago, an' set a whole bunch o' matches on fire."

"Can't you come up here an' help?" asked the suppositious Corbison.

"Sure! I'll come up an' do what I kin."

Ted had been speaking beside the body of the man he had shot. As he uttered the last words, Panhandle Ike then being on his way to the ladder, he felt of the body, and discovered that the outlaw was dead. After dragging the body away from the chasm's brink, he returned to the spot, and, lying down, waited for the next victim to appear.

CHAPTER IX.

TED'S GAME WORK.

Panhandle Ike, without suspicion of danger, felt around the wall of the cavity until his hand touched the rope ladder. As he went upward, Tom Menton called out: "Drag Flat Beak's pockets. He may have a match."

"If he hasn't, I know where ter find one," replied the little outlaw, "an' that's up in ther big chamber."

"That's shore so; I never thought of that. Hurry up, Ike, for down here I don't know where I am at. The gal is here somewhar, but I'm blamed if I know whar."

"I won't be long." Then he raised his voice, and, looking upward, called: "Hello, old pard! Air ye still holdin' out?" There was no answer. Ted deemed it the part of discretion to remain silent, now that Panhandle Ike was so near.

"Reckon ther old boy hev petered," remarked Moqui Pete, from below. "If that's so, then you takes ther lead, Panhandle."

There was no response to this speech, for the surviving partner of the firm of Corbison & Co. was not in condition to use his vocal organs. He had reached the upper end of the ladder, as Moqui Pete spoke, and was about to open his mouth and say something, when a hard rap on the head from the iron bar in the hand of Ted Strong induced immediate insensibility. Dragging the body to a point in the passageway near the grotto, Ted produced a gag, fitted and secured it, and then bound the victim's limbs. This done, he hurried back to the edge of the chasm.

It was easier to imitate Panhandle Ike's voice than that of Flat Beak Corbison. Confident of his ability to deceive, Ted said, for the benefit of the anxiously waiting

outlaws: "Find the girl and ask her to come up here. Flat Beak isn't a dead one yet, and he shore needs a little tender nussin'. I am er betting' that ther girl ain't so cold-hearted as ter see a feller bein' cross ther big divide without makin' his passage easy."

"I will come," spoke Cassie Barlow, eagerly, and Ted heard her move in the direction of the ladder.

He was surprised at her ready compliance with his request, but his surprise vanished when she came to the top of the ladder, and softly whispered: "You have fooled the others, Mr. Strong, but you haven't fooled me. When you spoke first, I caught a note that was not Corbison's."

Ted said nothing in reply, but his pulses bounded as he assisted the lovely young woman to a safe landing.

He led her a few paces away from the edge of the chasm, and then said, rapidly: "I am proud to be of service to such a brave and intelligent girl. You have shown by your actions that you are worth any youth in my company, and there is not one of them that is not worth his weight in gold. I am going to put you under orders, the same as if you were a member of the troop."

"I shall be pleased to serve you," she said, simply.

"At the foot of the hill which the outlet above overlooks, Ben Tremont and Carl Schwartz are stationed. They are waiting for a signal from me. It is my desire that you go to the mouth of the outlet and wave a lighted candle. Here is the candle and here are matches. Don't strike a light until you are within the grotto, which is only a short distance away. The boys will see the light, and come up to you. When they reach the outlet, tell Ben Tremont to ride like the wind for the settlements, pick up a doctor, and then make lightning time to Alden's cabin."

"I understand," said Cassie. "You are not convinced that poor Mr. Perkins is dead?"

"That's it. But, if not dead, he is dangerously wounded and in need of immediate professional assistance. If there is a chance for his life, he must have it."

"And—shall I return here?"

"No. It is my wish that you accompany Ben. You can ride Carl's horse. As for Carl, I can find use for him in the cave."

Cassie Barlow set out on her journey, and Ted walked back to the edge of the pit. In the character of Panhandle Ike, he spoke to the waiting outlaws:

"We are up a stump. No matches in ther chamber, an' none in ther grotto. Reckon we'll hev ter play cat, an' try ter git along with ther dark."

Not one of the outlaws could dispute Ted's assertion, for the only men who knew exactly what the cave contained were derprived of speech, Flat Beak Corbison by death and Panhandle Ike by the gag.

"Better come up here and join me," suggested the pseudo Ike. "Thar's something ter eat an' thar's something ter wet yer whistles with."

The liquid promise had its effect. Tom Menton started for the ladder, hugging the wall as he moved. On the way he came into violent collision with Moqui Pete. Their heads bumped together with a force that caused each man to stagger from the wall. Ted Strong heard a splash, and surmised that one of the outlaws had fallen into the pool. The water was not more than five feet deep, so there was little danger of drowning.

A cry for help revealed a contingency that he had not thought of. "Lend a hand, some one, for God's sake! Ther water's like ice, and I've got a cramp!"

The voice was that of Tom Menton.

Forgetful of his assumed character, intent solely on assisting the wretch who was in such dire straits, Ted shouted, not as Panhandle Ike, but as the big-hearted rough rider: "Can you reach him, boys? If you can't, then I'll come down and give a hand!"

For a moment there was no response. There was also silence in the water.

As soon as he had spoken, Ted realized that he had thrown aside his disguise. What would be the outcome?

His disagreeable reflections were broken by the voice of Jim Kane:

"I've got his hands, but Pete's not here, an' I'm afeard I can't yank him out. You better crawl down!"

Following the words Ted heard whispering.

This was suspicious. To his mind, it was evidence that his identity was known. To go down, therefore, would be to fall into a trap.

"I shore can't stand it much longer!" now wailed Tom Menton, who had probably been hauled out of the water.

No longer disturbed over the villain's position, Ted, speaking once more as Panhandle Ike, said: "I'm er comin'!"

So saying, he rattled the rope ladder and made other noises to carry out the impression that he was descending.

Suddenly there came the report of a pistol, followed by another and another.

The bullets struck the rocky wall where Ted's body would have been had he undertaken the descent.

The flash of the powder disclosed the position of the shooters. Ted fired twice, and then withdrew to a place of safety.

The fall of a heavy body, yells and curses, indicated that at least one of the shots had taken effect.

There could be no more play acting. The desperadoes were now wise to the situation, and might be expected to make a desperate fight for their lives.

There was, in their minds, a way of escape by the secret door, but would they attempt to take advantage of it?

A heated consultation, overheard by Ted, showed that the matter was under discussion.

"I say, let's skin out!" said Tom Menton. "Our bronchos are down at the lower outlet, an' we kin git inter ther hills afore this rantankerous kid kin raise his mob an' chase after us!"

"I'm fer stayin' in ther cave until we've salted his bacon," said Moqui Pete. "We're two to one, an', if we down Teddy, we've shore got ther works."

Two to one: That meant that Jim Kane had turned up his toes.

The pair of outlaws ceased to talk in tones audible to the listener. A program of some kind was arranged in whispers.

Ted's sharp brain guessed what it was.

One of the men would remain by the pool, while the other would go out the lower outlet, ride around the mountain and come into the cave by way of the upper entrance.

Such a design, if carried out without suspicion or knowledge in the mind of the intended victim, would place the leader of the young rough riders in a position of deadly danger.

But there were circumstances outside of those which had arisen, or could arise, in the cave, which militated against the success of the outlaws' plan. Ted smiled as he thought of them.

After five minutes had elapsed, during which time not a word had been spoken by anyone below, Ted came to the conclusion that either Menton or Moqui Pete had departed, for the purpose of attacking the enemy in the rear.

As perhaps an hour would elapse before the flank movement could be executed, Ted resolved to amuse himself during the interim.

Crawling near enough to the edge of the chasm to permit his voice to be heard and yet be out of danger, Ted called out to the man below: "How are you feeling, partner?"

"I'll partner you, Mister Teddy Tootsy-woots!" growled Tom Menton. "Think yer greased lightnin' on wheels, don't yer? I'll show yer what's what afore sunup!"

"Take it easy, Tom!" jeered Ted. "You're booked for the gallows, and you might as well get humble and shed your mind of all evil thoughts!"

A pistol cracked. Ted laughed. "Save your powder," he said. "I am shy myself, and I'll want all you have got."

The villainous constable did not reply, but for some time maintained a moody silence.

"Waiting for Pete to play a card from up his sleeve, are you?" said Ted, pleasantly, to break the silence.

"Do you guess what I'd do if I had you down here?" snarled Menton.

"Give me some peptonized baby fodder?" suggested Ted.

"I'd cut yer blasted tongue out, an' then I'd mash yer swelled *cabesa* to a jelly!"

"If wishes were fishes, what a meal you'd make, Tommy! By the way, I am pleased to find you in your present situation. Ever since you appeared on the scene I have regarded you as a more dangerous man that either Flat Beak Corbison or Panhandle Ike. You are an officer of the law, sworn to carry out the law's mandates. In betraying your trust, in allying yourself with the law's offenders, instead of seeking by all means in your power to bring them to punishment, you have placed yourself on a lower plane than that occupied by the villains whose cause you have espoused. You are a bad egg and a bad actor, Thomas, and the Territory of Arizona can well spare you!"

"We'll now proceed ter sing ther sockdology!" shouted the object of these remarks, in affected hilarity. "If Pete was here, I'd shore hev him pass around ther hat."

"Pete has gone to drum up help, I suppose?" said Ted.

"It's none o' your business whar he's gone!" Menton was becoming surly again.

"If I should conclude to leave you, Tommy, and make my way out of the upper outlet, you wouldn't need any help, would you?"

No answer. Tom Menton's jaw dropped when Ted spoke these words. If the youth should leave, as suggested, he might encounter and overcome Moqui Pete. In such an event, he—Tom—would have to seek the

lower outlet, and leave the cave without the satisfaction of having settled forever with the dangerous leader of the young rough riders.

Ted Strong, who divined what was passing in the villain's mind, spoke again.

"I have no intention of taking myself away, Thomas," he said, "for I want you, and I am going to have you!"

"You air, eh?" sneered the constable. "Then, why don't you slide down an' get me?"

"I'm waiting for you to come to me," replied Ted, coolly.

"Why don't yer whistle? Maybe I'll come er runnin'."

Ted smiled. Time was passing rapidly. Something was bound to happen before long. Fifteen minutes later something did happen.

CHAPTER X.

THE LAST REFUGE OF TOM MENTON.

A short time after Ted Strong said that he was waiting for Tom Menton to come up the ladder, a slight noise in his rear attracted his attention. This was followed by a low whisper, which Ted answered. More whispering, unheard by the constable below, took place. Then ensued a period of utter silence.

Suddenly Ted gave a yell of pain. The sounds of a desperate struggle, in which the voices of Panhandle Ike and Moqui Pete were heard, succeeded the yell.

Tom Menton, listening with all his ears, in a tremor of excitement, allowed a cry of fierce exultation to escape him when the sounds of a struggle ceased and the voice of Panhandle Ike called down the chasm: "We've fixed ther pap-suckin' skunk! Come up an' shove yer knife inter him fer luck!"

A moment later the constable had his hands on the ladder. He was halfway up when a sharp exclamation, uttered in pain and wrath, caused him to stop and sent all the blood from his face.

"*Donner und blitzen!* I haf gracked mine het, alretty!"

The voice was that of Carl Schwartz. In moving forward in the darkness, he had given his head a severe bump against a protruding section of the rocky wall.

Tom Menton, on the instant of the exclamation, knew that he had been made the subject of one of Ted Strong's cunning ruses.

As quick as a flash, he dropped to the floor of the pit, and hurriedly felt his way toward the passage leading to the lower outlet.

He had reached the opening into the passage, when a candlelight disclosed his position.

"Stay where you are!" sternly commanded Ted Strong. "Attempt to go on, and I will let daylight through you!"

For answer, Tom Menton dashed into the passage. A bullet flattened against the wall near his body, but he was out of sight before a second shot could be fired.

Leaving Carl Schwartz behind to guard Panhandle Ike, Ted, accompanied by Kit Summers and Mark Weston, went down the ladder in pursuit of the fleeing constable.

The presence on the scene of Ted's friends was in accordance with his orders. Before he set out at night from the camp near the settlements, he had instructed Mark Weston, Kit Summers, Bud Morgan, Jack Slate and Doc Fenton to find a place of concealment near the foot of the cliff, about which the secret outlet was supposed to be, and wait for the appearance of the outlaws. If the boys should be near enough, they might attempt a capture. If not near enough for action, they could wait until the outlaws had entered the cave, and then take their stations as close as possible to the entrance, and nab whoever came out.

The five youngsters, thus instructed, could find no protected spot nearer than half a mile from the cliff, but at night one of them crawled to within three hundred yards of the foot of the cliff, and, burying his body in the loose sand, kept watch on the rocky wall.

On the first night, the scout, Bud Morgan, saw nothing. On the second night, Doc Fenton, as the scout, saw five men pull aside the huge rock which served as the door of the secret entrance and disappear within the cave.

He announced his discovery to his comrades, and the five left their horses, and, walking to the door, sat down in front of it and waited for developments.

After hours, so it seemed to the impatient youths, they heard the hinges of the door creak, and, jumping to their feet, they made ready to receive the person who should emerge from the cave.

Moqui Pete appeared, and was instantly seized, thrown down and bound. The boys knew their business, and the surprised outlaw, looking into the muzzles of five revolvers, concluded to answer the questions which were put to him.

He correctly explained the situation inside the cave, and told of the murderous work which he had undertaken to accomplish.

A short consultation followed the outlaw's disclosures.

"Boys," said Bud Morgan, "it's now up to us to prance in and watch Ted finish ther game. I'm shore bettin' he holds a royal flush, but I aches ter see him play it. What I recommends is this: Let two of us camp here an' keep company with this yer pirootin' son of a sand flea, an' the rest of us hike round ther hill an' sashay up ter ther upper entrance."

This proposal was agreed to, but, as no agreement as to who should go and who should remain could be arrived at, the boys drew straws. Kit Summers and Mark Weston were elected to stay as guards over Moqui Pete, while Jack Slate, Bud Morgan and Doc Fenton got the other assignment.

The three made the upper entrance to the cave in quick time and there met Carl Schwartz, who was acting as lookout.

The four descended to the passageway where Flat Beak Corbison lay dead, Panhandle Ike rested prostrate a prisoner and Ted Strong held forth as master of the situation.

In whispers, the young rough riders consulted as to the next move on the program.

The bogus struggle was arranged and carried out.

Shortly afterward Carl Schwartz, in stepping forward whisper something in Ted's ear, bumped his head, and opened his mouth in wrathful speech.

"Our plan will be slightly disarranged by that yawp of yours, Carl," said Ted, as he lighted his candle, "but we'll come out all right."

The boys scrambled down the ladder and hurried after Tom Menton.

"He's shore trapped!" remarked Bud Morgan. "We've got him in the rear, an' if he passes outer ther secret door, Kit Summers an' Mark Weston will light down on him like a thousan' o' brick."

In a short time the party arrived at the door. It was closed.

By candlelight, Ted saw that the constable's horse was still in the rocky stable.

He scratched his head, and turned to Bud Morgan. "What do you make of this?" he asked.

"Won't tell yer until I've talked with ther boys on ther outside."

The door was opened, and the candlelight fell on the faces of Kit Summers and Mark Weston. There was no sign of the presence of Tom Menton.

"Didn't anybody come out a minute ago?" questioned Ted.

"You are the first to open the door since Moqui Pete passed out," answered Kit. Then he added, as he noted the look of amazement on his commander's countenance: "What's up? Have you lost somebody? Struck a case of mysterious disappearance?"

Ted explained. Mark Weston spoke up:

"If Menton did not come out of the cave, he must be in there somewhere now. Let's go back and make a search."

All the youths went into the stable.

Ted held up the candle, so that he could see all portions of the walls and ceiling. Suddenly he exclaimed: "There's where he has gone—into that hole in the corner over the horses!"

The boys looked, and could see near the ceiling a hole large enough for a man to crawl into. To reach it, one would have to mount on one of the animals.

But what kind of a hole was it, Ted asked himself. Was it a sort of *cul-de-sac,* or did it have an outlet through which the hunted desperado might escape?

"This mystery requires immediate explanation," said Ted, decisively. "I am going up there and investigate."

"An' I'm at yer heels!" announced Bud Morgan.

There was grave risk in the undertaking, but the boys who were to remain behind knew that their objections would be overruled and their protestations unheeded.

Ted Strong mounted the horse nearest the corner, and, catching hold of a sharp projection on the wall, drew himself up to the hole.

As he crawled out of sight, Bud Morgan entered the cavity.

For ten minutes Kit Summers, Mark Weston and the others waited in marked anxiety.

Then the head of Ted Strong was shown at the hole opening.

"We've found him," he said, quietly. "He has had an awful fall and has broken his leg and done something to his head. We need a rope to get him out."

"There are plenty here," said Kit Summers. "I'll get a good one and chuck it up to you."

Ted received the rope, and again disappeared from view.

Half an hour later the injured constable was lying on the floor of the stable. His leg had been given a temporary setting by Doc Fenton, who also dressed and bound up the bruised head. The skull had not been cracked, though there were some frightful lacerations.

Bud Morgan satisfied the curiosity of his comrades who had waited in the stable.

"Thar's a pit up yon," he said, "that has a bottom lined with jagged rocks. Ted was crawlin' along toward it, an' came within an ace of goin' over an' inter it. Reckon if I hadn't ketched him by ther foot he'd hev made ther trip, 'n' we'd hev two subjects fer ther hospittle, 'stidder one. Seems this yer murderin' galoot pitched inter ther put fust rattle outer ther box. Thar was nary fight in him when we reached him. Feels more chipper now, an' would like ter chew us up, 'stidder thankin' us. Ain't that so, Tommy?"

Menton, who had recovered his senses, glared at the speaker, but vouchsafed no reply.

It was now close upon daybreak.

When the darkness had disappeared, Ted Strong and his comrades left the cave. With them went Panhandle Ike, Moqui Pete and Tom Menton, as prisoners. The dead were left behind, to be looked after by the local officials. It was noon when the young rough riders rode up to the Alden cabin.

Cassie Barlow was standing in the doorway, and on her sweet face was a smile of happiness.

"Perkins is alive, is he?" said Ted, as he came toward her, his fine countenance alight with hope.

"Yes; and he will recover. The doctor has been here for hours."

With quick steps, Ted entered the room. On the bunk from which the dead body of the old miner had been removed lay Beanpole Perkins, his face pale, but his eyes clear and a smile playing about his mouth. By his side sat the doctor, a grizzled, keen-eyed Arizonian. "I have cautioned him about talking," said he, as Ted approached. "He will come out all right, but he must have absolute quiet for a few days."

Ted nodded his head, bestowed a look of deepest affection and sympathy on his wounded comrade, and then went out of doors.

The doctor followed. Asked as to the nature of the wounds, the doctor said: "He was shot in the breast. It just missed the heart, but he would have bled to death had not assistance come when it did. I have removed the bullet, and, as I said, there is no danger of a fatal termination if he is kept from excitement."

After the doctor had gone, Ted took occasion to compliment Cassie Barlow upon her invaluable assistance. "Perkins will owe his life to you," he said.

"To you, rather," she corrected, with a shake of her shapely head; "for I but executed the orders which you gave."

"All the same," persisted Ted, "it was the execution which counted."

She would have argued the matter, but Ted ran away and joined his companions.

He was in the highest spirits, not because he had succeeded in wiping out the most dangerous and desperate gang of outlaws that had ever infested Arizona, but for the reason that Beanpole Perkins had escaped death. A wonderful work had been accomplished without the loss of a member of his troop of thoroughbreds.

While waiting for the recovery of Perkins, he superintended the funeral of Philetus Alden, attended the several inquests which his marksmanship had precipitated, and also the preliminary examination which resulted in the holding for trial of Panhandle Ike, Moqui Pete and Tom Menton.

Six weeks after the capture of the desperadoes Ted and his troop took the trail for Prescott. At Flagstaff Cassie Barlow bade the boys good-by. The last to shake her hand was Beanpole Perkins. He whispered some words, with his mouth close to her ear, whereat she blushed and nodded her head.

"What did you say, Beanpole?" asked Kit Summers. "Did you tell her you couldn't write, but would get me to do it?"

Now it was Perkins' turn to blush.

The three desperadoes were tried at Prescott, and, being found guilty, were each sentenced to be hanged.

Ted Strong was given a vote of thanks by the legislature of Arizona, and the troop was banqueted by the foremost citizens of the capital.

When the time came for the young rough riders to leave for Nebraska, Mark Weston asked to be allowed to join them. "I can arrange my mine business in a few weeks, and, when that is done, I want to see a little more of the strenuous life before marrying and settling down to a staid existence."

The boys were glad to receive him into their ranks, and his election was simply a matter of acclamation.

THE END.

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